THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

STAPLEFORD

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/workswhytemelvil10whyt

Of this Edition of Whyte-Melville's Works One Thousand and Fifty Copies only have been printed by Morrison and Gibb Limited, Edinburgh, who have distributed the type

THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME X.

THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE

The Squire & Helen.

Frontispiece.

THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRED ROE

LONDON
W. THACKER & CO., 2 CREED LANE, E.C.
CALCUTTA: THACKER, SPINK & CO.
1899

All rights reserved

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	TWILIGHT	1
II.	COUNTRY QUARTERS	13
III.	THE BROOKES	27
IV.	STONEY BROTHERS	43
V.	TOLLESDALE	57
VI.	JACK BROOKE	71
VII.	A DRAGON'S TOOTH	85
VIII.	MARKET-DAY	96
IX.	UNCLE ARCHIE	110
X.	THE MIDDLESWORTH BALL	124
XI.	A BREAK-UP	138
XII.	RAISING THE WIND	153
XIII.	CARRYING ON	167
XIV.	TOO MUCH SAIL	180
XV.	DRIFTING TO LEEWARD	197
XVI.	COLD COMFORT	209
XVII.	PARTNERS	226
XVIII.	THE LONG LANE	240
XIX.	PRESSURE	253
XX.	RECOIL	267

6836675

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI.	AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S CASTLE	280
XXII.	A BROKEN REED	293
XXIII.	POUNCE COMMERCE	307
XXIV.	A BROKEN HEAD	323
XXV.	A BUNDLE OF STICKS	336
XXVI.	HIGH PRESSURE	350
XXVII.	"NOBBLER" KING	364
XXVIII.	THE LADIES' MILE	377
XXIX.	JACK'S ALIVE	392
XXX.	THE REASON WHY	405

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
"THE SQUIRE AND HELEN" . .	*Coloured Frontispiece*
"THE PATH TO BRIDLEMERE"	88
"'RAGS' FETCHING MISS BOLT"	98
"ARRIVALS"	182
"BUT HIS BACK WAS BROKE"	190
"A SHAMEFUL LETTER"	203
"PRESSURE"	261
"BEAT"	296
"'THANK GOD!' SAID JACK, 'IT'S NOTHING DISHONOURABLE!'"	302
"THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PAPERS"	323
"BLACKMAIL"	367
"IN THE GARDEN"	414

THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE

THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE

CHAPTER I

TWILIGHT

"IT'S hard lines, Mas'r Philip — hard lines! That's where it is, for a chap as is able and willin', and carn't get work for five weeks now come Toosday. The jobs is scarce, ye see; with the days shortening, and winter coming on, and what-not; but I dun-know how to better it, bless ye, not I, cut it which way you will."

Jem Batters having thus relieved his mind in the vernacular, turned to his companion a face of injured honesty and simplicity, scarcely in keeping with the general character of his appearance. A much-worn velveteen jacket, loose cord breeches, sturdy calves, and heavy ankle-boots, seemed the natural appendages of a countryman who was supposed to be as arrant a poacher as ever set a night-line in a reservoir, or a snare in a *smeuse*. Nor did Jem's countenance in any way redeem the rest of his person from the imputations under which it laboured. The features were good, but pale, though weather-beaten; and the eyes, small and cunning, looked bold, without being frank. A red handkerchief, knotted loosely round his neck, denoted pursuits somewhat without the pale of honest labour, though as yet on the safe side of the county gaol. Altogether he seemed a slangy, knowing, able-bodied, unscrupulous sort of person—such a one as a man had rather breakfast with than fight, nor care, indeed, to share his morning repast, unless there was enough prepared for three.

But "Mas'r Phil," properly called Mr. Philip Stoney, did not form his opinion from externals, and, indeed, was

accustomed to look deeper below the surface than most people. On the present occasion he took notice of the blood from a dead rabbit oozing through the pocket of Jem Batters's velveteen, and scrupled not to express his sentiments on the subject.

"You'll do no good without being strictly honest, Jem. I've told you so many a time. You've no more right to that rabbit in your pocket, than you have to take the gun out of my hand, and spout it at the first pawnbroker's shop you come to in the High Street of Middlesworth. You were paid to beat; and if you've done your day's work, you've got your day's wages. What business have *you* with the squire's property, if it was only the worth of a halfpenny?"

"The squire'll never miss it," replied Jem, with a sheepish expression of countenance, and a forced smile that did not improve his beauty. He looked askance at Philip Stoney while he spoke, like a dog who knows he has done wrong, and deprecates the anger of his master. The latter answered, in a sterner tone—

"The squire wouldn't miss it, if you took five shillings off his chimneypiece; but the law would send you to prison and hard labour, all the same; and serve you right! Poaching is but stealing out of doors, Jem. You ought to know that as well as I do. I tell you, I wouldn't trust a poacher any more than I would a housebreaker or a thief."

But Jem could not see the matter exactly in this light. It is doubtful if he ever admitted to himself he was committing a crime when he picked up a hare for supper on a "shiny night," though he had a vague idea that it was not quite a respectable action; and, indeed, if he knew his own interest, was better let alone.

"It's hard, too, Mas'r Philip," said he, plucking a dry twig from the adjoining hedge, and munching it with apparent relish. "But you've been a good friend to me, and mother too, however; and I take notice of what you says more nor I do of parson, nor squire neither. You couldn't give a poor chap a job, could you, Mas'r Phil?" added Jem, in his most insinuating tones, and without removing the twig from his mouth.

"I'll tell you what it is, Jem," replied the other, putting his hand at the same time into his pocket, "I've known you a long time, and I'll see if I can give you one more chance yet. Look ye here. You take that rabbit back to old Halfcock, the keeper. Promise now, and come down to our place the first thing to-morrow morning. I'll speak to my

brother to-night about you. But it's your last chance, Jem—mind that. We don't keep dogs that won't bark in our shop; and if a man isn't honest, and sober too, he'd better not come at all, for we shall be sure to find him out, and turn him adrift, without thinking twice about it. Good-night, Jem. Take the rabbit back before you go home, and don't be late to-morrow, for it's market-day, and we shall be pretty busy before twelve o'clock."

So the two parted on their respective paths, Philip Stoney stepping briskly out on his homeward way, and Jem Batters compromising the matter of the rabbit by laying it down in the corner of a copse where it was pretty sure to be found by the keeper when he came round with a retriever to pick up lost game next morning.

There had been a *battue* at Bridlemere that day—not one of your pounding, slaughtering, cannonading attacks, resembling a general action in all but the small proportion of those who run away; when, to enjoy the sport—if such it can be called—dandies come down from London, with all the modern improvements in dress, arms, and accoutrements, for the express purpose of learning how often they can pull their triggers within a given number of hours. If they shoot straight, and obtain an enormous bag, so much the better; but the great thing is to let the gun off at the utmost possible rate of rapidity and repetition. When the colonel is sent forward with one breechloader in his hand, and two more carried by his attendants (six barrels in all), so that he can never be for an instant unprepared; when my lord, with his legs very wide apart, stands like a colossus in the ride, and while

Slides the bird o'er lustrous woodland,

misses rocketer after rocketer, with increasing impatience and disgust; when gentlemen's gentlemen, sighing for the warmth of the castle, and the luxuries of "the room," load for their masters with a gracious carelessness, not always quite safe for the sportsman, but assumed by the valet as if he were performing the mere everyday duties of the toilet; when the duke, at close of day, apologises to his guests for the badness of the sport, and condoles with them that they have only averaged some two hundred head per gun! No; the *battue* at Bridlemere was nothing of this sort, but a cosy little affair of eighty cock-pheasants, and twice that number of hares and rabbits, equally enough distributed amongst half a dozen people, who shot well and fairly, without more

jealousy than was desirable in order that each man should do his best. There was a pretty range of copsewood, skirting a warm and sheltered dingle, to shoot in the forenoon; a capital luncheon, with strong home-brewed, at two o'clock; and a good deal of sport afterwards in the fox-covert, which afforded, in addition to a woodcock, the cheering sight of a brace of the wild and wily animals, to the preservation of which it was specially devoted. Old Halfcock never trapped a fox in his life, though, with the perverse instinct of a gamekeeper, he would have been only too glad of the chance, for well he knew that such an offence against the squire's standing orders would be his first and last. So Bridlemere offered a sure find nearly once a fortnight in open weather; and though the squire was wont to complain with sufficient pride that the duke was "very hard upon it," two or three of the best runs in the season owed their celebrity to that time-honoured locality. Game and foxes are a contradiction that has long since seemed to be an impossibility; and there was, without doubt, a fair show of both at Bridlemere.

Philip Stoney, walking home to Middlesworth, reflected pleasantly enough on his day's amusement, and the skill he had displayed both in and out of covert, at flesh and fowl, fur and feather, ground game and winged. Phil was an Englishman all over — a pure-bred Anglo-Saxon as ever stopped a cricket-ball in flannels, or handled a Purdey in velveteen. He was no Admirable Crichton, like the hero of a novel, who must needs be strong as Hercules, beautiful as Apollo, brave and swift as the son of Peleus, alternately sulking in his tent, and vapouring over his comrades on the narrow strip of sand where the god-like heroes of the *Iliad* laid their ten-years' leaguer round the walls of Troy. No; he was but a fair representative of the thousands of Englishmen who constitute the upper and middle classes of our happy country. For his bodily gifts, he could walk, run, leap, skate, and swim as well as his neighbours, though truth compels me to admit that he knew not a note of music, and was an execrable dancer. He could stand up fairly enough to professional bowling, when the ground was smooth; shoot straight, either in the coppice or on the stubble, when not too much hurried; and would ride a good horse, in a good place, with a pack of foxhounds, even at the expense of an occasional fall. His mental qualities and acquirements were rather sound than brilliant. Latin and Greek he had learned, and forgotten. Of history, both ancient and modern, he was not more ignorant than other people. Science he might have

dabbled in, could he have spared the time. He had a clear head for business, was a capital accountant, and spoke French, the only Continental language he attempted, as Talleyrand said the Great Duke did, "bravely." For his tastes, he so far agreed with Byron, that

> He loved our taxes, when they're not too many;
> He loved a sea-coal fire, when not too dear;
> He loved a beef-steak too, as well as any;
> Had no objection to a pot of beer.

Was a little inclined to Liberalism in politics, and intolerance in religion, believed *The Times*, shaved scrupulously, drank port wine, and hated a lie.

Without being handsome, he had a clear, fresh complexion, and a small, well-shaped head, on which the brown locks were cropped short and close. His teeth were good, and he showed them all when he spoke. His eyes light, but looking straight into your own, with a frank and fearless expression that inspired confidence in his sincerity at once. All this, carried by a square, able-bodied figure, very quick and energetic in its gestures, offered an exterior rather pleasing than otherwise; and as well known in the streets of Middlesworth as the late-erected drinking-fountain or the old church clock.

He stepped along more briskly, as evening began to close, and the town lights twinkled out more and more numerous through the hazy twilight, yet lingering round some dull crimson streaks on the horizon left by the departed sun. It was a soft, still November evening, such as is never experienced out of England, and shows our English climate and our English scenery to the greatest advantage. Everywhere else in Europe a fine winter's day means a dazzling sun and a piercing cold, that if you only took your wraps off, would finish you in about ten minutes; but in our own little island, which we abuse so heartily amongst ourselves, it means a green and grateful earth; a sky of dappled clouds, serene and motionless, edged here and there with gold; a sleeping fragrance of vitality only waiting for the spring; and a mild, hazy atmosphere, through which trees, and hills, and hedges loom out, grave and ghostly and indistinct. Philip felt in charity with all mankind, and more than usually grateful to Providence for the many advantages of his position, the many pleasures of health and strength, and everyday life—nay, for the harmless amusement and enjoyment of the hours he had just spent at Bridlemere. Behind him was the recollection of a delightful day's shooting, in which he had borne a skilful

and satisfactory part; the pleasant interchange of good fellowship with those of his own age, nowhere so frankly afforded as in manly out-of-doors recreation, and which furnishes one of the strongest rational arguments in favour of field-sports; a conviction that he was esteemed, certainly not for his station, or such fictitious advantages, but for himself; and a pleasant consciousness that he was not an idle man, like most of those with whom he had spent the day, but a working bee, for whom business was business, and pleasure, pleasure—an arrangement which enhances extremely the satisfaction of both, and which the drones, who eat the honey without the labour of making it, never can be brought to understand.

Around him were already stretching the level town meadows, grass at three pounds an acre, smooth and springy as a garden lawn, feeding huge beeves, that scarcely moved in their early beds by the footpath, save to raise great handsome wide-horned heads, and stare lazily at him as he passed—a movement, nevertheless, sufficiently terrifying to the only other passenger across the town-lands, a little girl pattering home to "mother" from a half-mile errand, who kept close behind Philip, for convoy through this alarming region.

Presently he sees the white indistinct lines of the drying grounds in the suburbs, and "mother" herself, with soapy arms, and pinned-up skirts, taking in fluttering garments from the clothes-line; and now immediately before him, so to speak, is the anticipation of warmth, and firelight, and dinner, and rest, in his own comfortable home on the other side of the town. He is a Middlesworth man, and is proud of it, firmly believing that for health, beauty, convenience, public buildings, and private society, everything but "business"—of which he could wish it afforded a little more—his town would bear comparison with any city on the face of the earth.

Everybody might not, perhaps, agree with Philip Stoney in this favourable estimate. Mr. Dowlas, the draper, who set up here when he retired from London, having failed there twice, once in Wigmore Street, and once in the Tottenham Court Road, considers it "a poor place altogether, sir; a place in which a young man finds no opening; a place quite behind the times"; and a smart, black-bearded Italian, generally regarded by the inhabitants as a conspirator, with horrible designs against the French Emperor, to be prosecuted in some mysterious manner, from a confectioner's shop in the market-place, left it after a month's trial, in a fit of somewhat

unreasonable disgust, because there was no opera. Nevertheless, the population in general are extremely patriotic, and however much they may squabble amongst themselves, rise like one man to vindicate the honour and glory and general respectability of their town.

As Middlesworth, however, may not be quite so well known to the general public as to its own inhabitants, and the nobility and gentry of the shire, who frequent its shops on market-day, and fill its judicial buildings at Quarter Sessions, Assizes, and such other important gatherings of landed proprietors—as, moreover, the simple story I have to tell is chiefly connected with this locality and its immediate neighbourhood, I may be permitted to pause on the very threshold of my narrative, for the purpose of affording the reader some vague idea of the general features and character of the place.

To a certain extent, and from a metropolitan point of view, particularly as regards facilities for borrowing money, discounting bills, and robbing the British public, Mr. Dowlas is right. Middlesworth *is* far behind the times, when compared with London, Liverpool, Manchester, and such large, populous, and speculative cities; but money, nevertheless, is to be made in its quiet streets, by honest enterprise; and many an active, industrious tradesman has realised a comfortable competence in its marts, and retired in the prime of life to enjoy the fruits of his success in its suburbs. These outskirts are consequently well supplied with the peculiar style of house which, when isolated by twenty feet or so from its neighbours, is dignified by the title of "a villa," but of which half a dozen constitute "a terrace," and twice that number "a place." Plate-glass and laburnums are the specialities of these residences; and save for the consideration that all the rooms are in front, and commanded from the public road, they would seem to be commodious and comfortable dwellings enough.

But if the suburbs of Middlesworth thus run to retirement and gentility, the streets and lanes and rows, within the actual precincts of the town, affect no such attempts at refinement or ostentation. They have no pretension to sink the trade by which they thrive. Bow-windowed shops, especially for the sale of butchers' meat, protrude themselves boldly on the pavement, which is, however, in many places wide enough to admit of two male passengers walking abreast. Stalls, whereon are exposed most commodities of daily life, form an outwork to this footway, projecting far into the street. Any intervals that might otherwise be left unguarded are filled with hand-barrows, empty casks, and articles of

ornamental husbandry, such as iron-work, ploughs, many-teethed harrows, or patent dibbling machines, so that the width of the thoroughfare may be contracted to the scantiest limits. A cattle-market, too, is held weekly in the narrowest of the streets, and as the town is paved throughout with the smoothest and most slippery of stones, it may be imagined that a ride or drive through Middlesworth, on any special occasion, is a progress not entirely devoid of that excitement which springs from a sense of personal fear.

The shops, however, are cheap and good of their kind. The staple manufacture of the town being muffatees, it is needless to observe that these are not to be procured for love or money, of decent quality, owing, perhaps, to the brisk export trade driven with the South Sea Islanders for this indispensable article of costume; but all other necessaries, and most luxuries of life, are found in Middlesworth, of as good quality as in London, and at little more than cost price.

Two branch railways connect this flourishing town with two great arteries of English traffic, rendering its communications with other places as facile as is compatible with the inconvenience of its local arrangements, trains being scarce during the day, but redundant before light in the morning and after dark at night. It has, besides, a racecourse, a corn exchange, a homœopathic dispensary, an hospital, three churches, of which the oldest is, of course, the handsomest, and a nondescript building for the administration of justice, presenting a happy combination of several distinct orders of architecture, including the Chinese, with twisted pillars, parti-coloured porches, and an Oriental roof, the whole wrought out in brickwork and stucco, the colour of strawberries and cream.

There are days of bustle and confusion at Middlesworth, but there are also days of peace and somnolent quiet, verging on stagnation. Once a year, when Tattersall's pours its subscribers into the grand stand on its racecourse, for the great Middlesworth Handicap; once a week, when the adjacent villages send their rustic inhabitants to market in its overflowing streets, and their carriers' carts to increase the profits of its public-houses and beer-shops, a stranger would imagine that he had arrived at the very emporium of speculation and commerce; but let him stay over the night at the Plantagenet Arms, or elsewhere, and sally forth after his coffee-room breakfast next day. Lo! the spell is broken; the hive, lately so busy and populous, is hushed and lonely

now; the shops are empty, the streets deserted; save the church clock lazily chiming the quarters, not a sound disturbs the drowsy air, and Middlesworth seems to stand solemn, silent, and untenanted, as Palmyra, the City of the Dead.

Philip Stoney had lived in the town all his life, had been to a day-school in its High Street, and played in its cricket matches (Middlesworth against Mudbury) ever since he was old enough to wield a bat or stop a ball. Except for a couple of years spent in London, to give him an insight into business, and a few months at Manchester with a flourishing cousin, who proposed to put the extra polish of a commercial education on him in his counting-house, and certainly did take him to half a dozen balls and dinner-parties every week, he had never quitted his own home for more than a few days at a time. No wonder he looked affectionately on every nook and corner of the quaint old place; no wonder he felt interested in the Mayor's improvements, and the Town Council's edicts, and all the petty details of the circle in which he lived, including the little squabbles and heart-burnings of the municipality, a body no less distinguished for diversity of opinion than for the frequency and excellence of the dinners at which it was their official privilege to meet.

Many a time had Philip watched the lights of Middlesworth as he neared them at eventide, and felt he was really going *home*. After a jaunt for business or pleasure into the adjoining counties; after a day with the duke's hounds, on a certain blemished old chestnut horse, by which he set great store, and justly, inasmuch as his Grace's own stable could not produce a better hunter, and the animal, notwithstanding its lean old head, and a pair of very worn-looking forelegs, afforded Philip many a delightful gallop in a recreation both of them enjoyed above all others. After a few hours' good shooting as to-day in winter, or after a picnic in summer, with a bevy of Middlesworth young ladies, damsels of fascinating manners, though somewhat gushing, and rejoicing in sumptuous apparel, such as dazzles, while it subdues; but the advantage of whose society, I fear, Philip did hardly appreciate, being indeed less susceptible to the florid order of beauty, than to the chaste, and classical, and severe. After any and all of these excursions, I repeat, it was his nature to return to Middlesworth as the bird returns to its nest; nay, with even a more eager alacrity, for the bird, we know, goes out to feed, whereas the unfeathered biped comes home for that important ceremony. To be young, to be hungry, to be able to walk five miles an hour, heel and toe, these are advantages of which

men are scarcely conscious, yet of which they make good use while they possess them. It was Philip's habit to hurry home as if he were very hungry indeed, which perhaps was generally the case.

To-night, however, his pace was variable and ill-sustained. Sometimes he strode on rapidly, at a rate that forced his little follower to break into a short jerking trot; sometimes he relapsed moodily into a thoughtful crawl, denoting the absorbing influence of profound reflection, and once he halted so suddenly that his unprepared convoy ran fairly between his legs. But Philip was undisturbed by this, as by every other external influence of the moment. Habitual day-dreamers, like habitual drunkards, preserve at their worst an inner consciousness that enables them to shake off, with a temporary effort, the effects of their favourite indulgence; but a practical, wide-awake intellect, steeped in a fit of abstraction, like a sober man who has chanced for once to get drunk, loses all power of observation, and abandons all attempt at self-consciousness or self-control. The child's excuse of "Please, sir, mother said I must be home afore dark," was quite lost upon him, though repeated more than once, nor did he miss the little footsteps when they pattered joyfully away in front at the welcome sight of "mother" in the drying ground. His thoughts must have been very far from Middlesworth and its outskirts, to judge from his preoccupation. His manner was not that of a man who is thinking of his dinner, the subject to which human reflection naturally points about this hour of the day, and when he reached the bridge that spans a sluggish river meandering round the outskirts of the town, he seemed to have abandoned all idea of that necessary refreshment, for he stood still when half-way across, and looked dreamily over the parapet into the quiet stream.

It was nearly dark now. A star or two struggled faintly through the thin misty clouds that were stealing over the heavens from the south. The light breeze, though damp, was soft and pleasant to his cheek, fanning him with quiet breath ere it passed on to stir the rustling sedges by the riverside, and mingle their murmurs with the drowsy lap of the water against its low, level banks.

The town was close at hand, with its hum of voices and continuous tread of men; but Philip seemed no more aware of its vicinity than if he had been in the middle of the Great Desert. The river was beneath his feet, stealing on to the sea, slowly, insensibly, surely, as time steals on to eternity; but he thought not of the river nor the sea, nor indeed, in the

common acceptation of the words, of time nor of eternity neither.

Dim though they were, the two or three stars visible seemed to have more attraction for him than any other material objects, and he indulged in a good long stare at these celestial bodies, apparently deriving a certain relief and gratification from the process. It was a strange occupation for a man of Mr. Stoney's character and habits; so near dinner-time, too, and after a day's shooting at Bridlemere.

Mankind, I believe, after all, are very much alike. We differ, it is true, in our external appearance, our faces, figures, complexions, manners, and various styles of ugliness; but I make little doubt that the formation of each one's heart, liver, and digestive process is upon the same pattern, and indeed almost identical. On a like principle, the springs that set the outer man in motion, the feelings, affections, weaknesses, and prejudices of one specimen are common to all humanity. Were it not so, where would be the advantage of studying human nature, of acquiring that knowledge which, like the science of medicine, is based on the assumption that all interiors are alike? You look at an old gentleman dozing over his wine by the fireside, bald, portly, and double-chinned, infirm upon his pins, and spread into a goodly bulk below the girdle. It is hard to believe that this is the same man who led the forlorn hope at Mullagatawny, and won the light-weight steeplechase at Ballinasloe, besides taking all hearts captive in Dublin by the agility of his dancing and the symmetry of his figure, the year the potatoes were so plentiful and the Viceroy's balls so well attended. Or you watch a venerable dame, with a Mother Shipton nose and chin, a shrill, shaking voice, false teeth, false hair, and a complexion of brickdust and whitewash, wondering the while how this can be the lady who refused dukes and marquises, and made a runaway match for love with a clerk in the Foreign Office, temporarily breaking the heart of the old gentleman aforesaid in that ill-advised performance. Perhaps you speculate on the possibility of renewing the flash in the man's spirit, or the capability for indiscretion in the woman's heart: perhaps you arrive at the conclusion that neither ever really grow old, that the sacred fire is never thoroughly quenched in the immortal subject, but, though damped and smothered for the present, will assuredly flicker up again at some future period, bright and consuming as of yore.

Old and young, men and women, wise and simple, rich and poor, for each and all there is a combustible principle

somewhere beneath the clay—a wild drop in the blood, a crevice in the plate-armour, a soft spot in the heart.

Philip Stoney was of the same material as his fellow-creatures, and, perhaps, on emergency, not a bit wiser or stronger than the rest. Nevertheless, he made no long stay upon the bridge, but after a good stare at the stars, sighed gently, and walked on with rapid step and head erect, like a man who, looking far into the future, has made up his mind to follow out what he sees there, resolutely and without fear.

CHAPTER II

COUNTRY QUARTERS

NOTWITHSTANDING its many weaknesses and shortcomings, its unworthy subterfuges under pressure, and obvious want of confidence on the eve of a division, even the Opposition papers could not but admit that Government showed sound discretion in stationing a squadron of light dragoons at Middlesworth. The presence of the detachment shed its exhilarating influence over every nook and corner of the town. Public-houses in by-streets, albeit never languishing for want of business, found trade so briskly on the increase, as to admit of their providing customers gratis with glees, fiddles, and other musical provocatives of thirst. Small shopkeepers, deriving no practical benefit from the presence of the military, but rejoicing in that sense of bustle which the mercantile mind connects vaguely with an idea of profit, were glad to treat the men of the sword to much serious drinking free of expense. It was the beer these heroes swallowed, not what they paid for, that stimulated consumption so vigorously during the dark hours intervening between evening stables and watch-setting. The principal hotel, too, furnished the officers' mess with wines at the highest possible price, and sundry lodging-house keepers derived their own share of profit from such enterprising ladies as did not disdain to accompany their husbands into country quarters.

All classes received the cavalry with open arms. Even the farrier-major, notoriously the ugliest man in the regiment, and the thirstiest, confessed that he had more liquor given him than he could drink, and, although an Irishman, more offers of marriage than he could find it in his conscience to entertain. The muffatee makers, as may be supposed, were not the least ardent admirers of their military guests. The male portion seemed too happy to welcome any additional incentive to the consumption of excisable fluids, and the female stitchers, closers, and other handicrafts-women of the trade, felt secure of a suitor apiece, spurred, braided, and

small-waisted, of easy manners, chronic thirst, and tolerable constancy until ordered elsewhere.

A walk through Middlesworth after sunset afforded accordingly an amusing and enlivening sight. The muffatee makers having finished stitching for the day, turned out in streams, gay with their best attire, in abundant crinolines, saucy hats, and hair, though not very well brushed, dressed in the newest fashion. I must allow they were little remarkable for beauty as a class,—even the farrier-major was obliged to admit that,—but, then, as he observed, "They was so haffable!" Their military swains 'squired them about the doors of the different public-houses, while their civilian adorers were drinking steadily within—the latter thus consoling themselves under unavoidable defeat; for how could they hold their own against such odds as clanking spurs, laced jackets, forage caps (without peaks) balanced on one ear, waxed moustaches, and, above all, that fascinating walk, half stride, half swagger, combining the utmost rigidity of body, with apparent paralysis of the lower limbs, which is specially affected by every dismounted dragoon?

Private Overall, of C Troop, Loyal Dancing Hussars, lounging in the ill-lighted street, under the sign of the Fox and Fiddle, and listening to someone playing an accordion within, seemed the only individual in uniform unprovided with a companion of the other sex. Overall was a smart fellow, too, a favourite with his captain, rather an authority amongst his comrades, very often seen smoking a cigar, and, when he took off his pipe-clayed glove, further adorned with a ring.

That Miss Blades, the butcher's daughter, was secretly over head and ears in love with Overall, and shutting her eyes to the humiliating consideration that she was thus "letting herself down," would steal out presently for a five minutes' interview at the corner of the street, under pretence of "fetching father's beer," is a shred of gossip unconnected with my tale; and on which I am not obliged to dwell; but, in the meantime, Overall was switching the unoffending air with a smart riding-whip, and debating in his own mind whether he would not go in for just another half-pint, not without a strong inclination to carry that measure in the affirmative. Presently he espied a comrade coming up the street in the attire soldiers call "coloured clothes"—an expression they apply indiscriminately to all civil garments, even a suit of black, in contradistinction to the scarlet or blue of their own uniforms. On the present occasion the coloured clothes were of a good working fustian,

denoting that the wearer was a bâtman, or officer's servant, though on the strength of the regiment as a trooper in its ranks. He carried a pair of very workmanlike top-boots in his hand, and was obviously hastening back to barracks. He *must* have been in a hurry, for he declined his friend's invitation to drink.

"Do as I do, Tommy?" asked Overall hospitably, with a jerk of his smart head towards the Fox and Fiddle. "Take a drain, man: it'll do ye good!"

"Throat's as dry as a limekiln!" answered Tommy, whose surname was Belter, passing the back of his large hand across his moustaches. "Can't be done though, Bill. Time's up, d'ye see?"

"Just a suck, and run home again," pleaded Overall, spinning a sixpence in the air, and catching it dexterously as it fell. "Wants twenty minutes to stables yet."

But Belter was proof against his comrade's solicitations, and passed on, shaking his head gravely as one who fulfils a duty at great personal sacrifice. Let us follow him through the windings of two or three dark and slippery streets, which he threaded as though well acquainted with their intricacies, and in the gloomiest of which a heavy figure lurched helplessly against him, and subsided with a drunken laugh into a sitting posture on the pavement.

"Hurrah!" hiccupped Jem Batters—for Jem, I am sorry to say, it was. "It's my call now. Mr. Batters will favour the company with a song. Hurrah!"

Belter spread a cotton handkerchief carefully on the driest square of pavement, stood the top-boots thereon with extreme deliberation, and then raised the sitter slowly to his legs, propping him against a friendly lamp-post, and urging him to "hold on by his eyelids till his missis could nip round the corner and fetch him home."

Jem Batters, however, seemed to treat all such domestic interference with utter contempt. Persuaded that he was presiding over a convivial meeting with equal grace and ability, he continued to pour out a doleful lament, bewailing himself in the reflection that

> ——if he had had good government,
> He had not come to this——

and impressing on his hearer with touching gravity (while he clung to the lamp-post), a moral contained in the following stanza, which, though it seemed to have no con-

nection with the rest of his ditty, he repeated over and over again—

> But I was always ready
> To run at everyone's call:
> Though it grieves my mind, yet still, I find
> Good government is all.

Then he shook his head, got gradually lower and lower down the lamp-post, and subsided once more into his former sitting posture on the flag-stones.

The fact is, Jem was helplessly drunk. Several causes had combined since sundown to produce this disgraceful, and I am bound to say, by no means unusual, result.

In the first place, Jem was desirous of meeting a friend in Philip Stoney's employment, to impart the good news that he hoped to enter the same service on the morrow. A narrow, crowded street is an uncomfortable locality for conversation. The friend was a married man; but it was washing-day at home. Independent of the confusion, damp, and other disagreeables attending such an operation in the scanty lodging tenanted by a working man, he was too well drilled by his "missis" to think of bringing in a visitor at such a time. Where could the two go but into the well-warmed, well-lighted, and well-decorated tap of the familiar Fox and Fiddle? There they had cleanliness, comfort, and shelter, the excitement of society, and the charms of music, for the accordion was in practised and untiring hands. There they were free to talk, and laugh and jest, and gossip with their own class, discussing their news of the day, the rate of wages, and the price of bread—just as interesting to them as the odds on the Derby, or the defeat of Ministers, to my lord at Brookes's and White's. But being there, they must call for a pint. Men always begin with a pint, and soon that which promised to be but a cheerful and friendly meeting, grew to a quarrelsome and degrading debauch. Jem Batters had only one shilling in his pocket—the shilling Philip gave him in the afternoon; but a man with a tendency to inebriety can get very drunk for that sum if he likes. The soldiers, too, shared the beer to which they were treated very freely with Jem. He was an able-bodied, likely looking young fellow, just the stuff, so they told him, out of which to make a dragoon, sinking the two years' riding-school drill indispensable for such a metamorphosis; and Jem, who had a vague idea in his cups that he might some day be tempted to take the shilling, encouraged the idea, though he never went so far as actually to accept Her Majesty's bounty.

Contented, as it seemed, with the quantity of liquor his military aspirations procured him free of expense, he would have enlisted long ago, like many another unquiet spirit, had it not been for his mother, but with all his faults there was this one redeeming point in Jem's character, that he loved old Dame Batters in his heart. He was often hard in speech to her; he was rude and disrespectful in behaviour: but this was the rind, so to speak, and outer husk of the man. At the core he would have made any sacrifice rather than vex "mother," and the old woman knew it.

"He's not so steady, our Jem ain't," she would say to her cronies by the fireside, "not so steady as some on 'em, but he's a good son, is Jem, and always has been, there! and always will be."

Jem did not look very steady now, with a red neckcloth untied, and foolish eyes shining out from a pale face in the dull stare of intoxication. Belter glanced down at him, half sympathising, half scornful, but appeared to think no further interference necessary, for he gathered up the top-boots and resumed his walk to barracks without troubling himself any more about his helpless acquaintance.

Preserving his burden carefully from a light drizzling rain, now beginning to fall, the bâtman entered the barracks, and proceeded to the officers' quarters with his usual steady gait, and immovable, not to say vacant, expression of countenance.

Only a man familiar with its every nook and corner could have found his way along the passage and up the gloomy staircase, whereon a feeble oil-lamp shed the smallest possible amount of light, without tumbling over a certain empty chest and iron coal-box that fortified the approaches to his destination. Belter, however, walked confidently on till he reached a dirty and dilapidated door, on which was painted, in letters nearly obliterated, "Offs'. Qrs. No. 5." Here he gave two solemn consecutive thumps with his sturdy knuckles, and followed his summons at once into the apartment, after the manner of these domestics, without waiting for an answer from within.

There is no greater contrast than that afforded by the inside and outside of an officer's barrack-room. The passage was as dark, dirty, and dismal, as can be conceived. The bare boards—for of course it was uncarpeted—stood an inch deep in dried mud, brought in by many a pair of regulation boots and clinking spurs. It was scarcely better lighted by day than by night, and besides the dreary chest and coal-box above mentioned, there was not an article of furniture to be

seen, suggestive of a civilised dwelling-place; but no sooner had the bâtman closed the door behind him, than he entered an apartment overflowing with every modern comfort, convenience, and luxury, all portable moreover, and made to be packed up and carried about wherever the regiment moved in its change of quarters. There was a Brussels carpet, there was even a hearth-rug, whereon a royal Bengal tiger, gorgeous in colour, and of abnormal stripes, was worked in tapestry; there was a couch, of ample width and proportions, forming a sofa by day and a bedstead by night, of which the brass knobs and general iron-work denoted that it could be taken away in a baggage-waggon at five minutes' notice; there was an easy-chair of the easiest description, draped with a real tiger-skin, obviously no relation to the monster on the hearth-rug; there was a table that made a chest, and a chest that made a table, both adorned with rich coverings of gaudy hues, and littered with their respective treasures; gold-topped scent-bottles, silver dressing things, ivory hair-brushes—all the appliances of an elaborate, and, indeed, lady-like toilet, except a mirror, represented in this martial domicile by a four-inch shaving-glass, hung on a nail in the window-sill. Several gun-cases were stowed away in corners, surmounted by trophies, consisting of Eastern sabres, regulation swords, cherry-stick pipes, riding-whips, umbrellas, and sabretasches. Innumerable boots were ranged in military order against the walls, and at least twenty pairs of spurs, inclusive of those expressly manufactured with smooth rowels, for dancing, occupied the chimneypiece, forming indeed, with the green plush cushion on which they reposed, its principal ornament.

Above the fireplace hung a photographic print of the *Ariadne*, supported by a portrait of Beeswing, in oils, and a likeness of Tom Sayers, in water-colours; the mare looking a good deal more attenuated by training than the champion. An embroidered cigar-case lay open by a gold-lace forage-cap, where both had been cast aside hurriedly on the couch, and a deep tin bath, yet steaming with hot soap-and-water, from which the occupant had lately emerged, like Venus from the sea, filled the apartment with a misty vapour, that mingled heavily with its habitual odours of saddlery, blacking, varnish, aromatic perfumes, and stale tobacco-smoke.

Ragman de Rolle, formerly of Eton College, Bucks, middle division, fifth form, and No. 9 in the ten-oar, late of Christ Church, Oxford,—whence, I am concerned to add, he was rusticated for breach of discipline, before the completion of his second term,—and now subaltern in Her Majesty's

Loyal Dancing Hussars, having just washed himself, after his day's exercise, from top to toe, is preparing to smoke his fifth and last cigar before dinner, in all the comfort of warmth, clean linen, and a fancy costume of velvet, such as in these days has completely superseded the old-fashioned dressing-gown.

Mr. de Rolle poises the Havannah in his fingers, and eyes the top-boots which Belter is disposing in military line with their comrades. To judge by his countenance, he has very little on his mind, nor a mind indeed constructed to carry any considerable burden at a time, but his face is rosy and good-humoured; his figure, though somewhat thick and lumpy for a light dragoon, is vigorous and full of health, whilst his clear eye, and glossy hair, denote that good digestion, without which no mortal can be said to enjoy his fair share of physical happiness. Enviable man; he has but one anxiety at present—he is a little apprehensive, not without reason, of growing too fat—and meditates "Banting," though he has not yet become a disciple of the Great Attenuator.

"Belter," says his master, after a pause of deep thought, "those tops must be three shades lighter at least. You've browned them to mahogany, and I like them the colour of double Gloucester cheese."

Belter springs to attention, not a twitch crosses that well-drilled servant's face. "Very good, sir," is all the answer, and yet the complexion of these tops is the curse and the trial of Belter's life. "He'll be druv to drink, he knows it," as he tells Overall, in moments of convivial confidence. "It's trouble as done it, all along o' them tops; but he'll be druv to drink, see if he ain't." Then he finishes his beer with a sigh, and walks steadily off, once more to resume his boot-trees, and his brush-case, and his daily efforts at the unattainable.

"Shall I clean 'em all over again, sir?" asks Belter hopelessly, pointing to at least half a dozen pair.

"Yes—no," answers Cornet de Rolle, for he is a good-natured cornet enough, notwithstanding his peculiar taste in colours. "Only mind next time to turn me out properly. Hang it, man, if you want a pattern, go and buy a cheese, and copy it! Come in!"

The last two words are roared out pretty loudly, in answer to a summons at the door, from a heavy kick, which nearly drives in the panels, followed by the entrance of a young man, with a short black pipe in his mouth, emitting

fragrant odours of Latakia. He is clad in a shooting dress of knickerbockers, leggings, Hythe boots, grey jerkin, felt hat, with blackcock's feather, and, in short, the usual war-paint of a brave in the present day.

"Holloa, Rags!" said the new-comer, removing the pipe from between two rows of very white teeth, under a silky and carefully trimmed moustache. "Look here, old fellow, you must take my orderly duty to-morrow; I've promised to go to Tollesdale, for a crack at old Waywarden's pheasants, and I quite forgot I should have the belt on. Never mind, I can do yours next time, so it's all right."

Now Rags, as his brother officers called him, would much prefer having the morrow to himself, not that he has anything particular to do, but, like all idle men, he enjoys and appreciates the pleasures of indolence for its own sake, yet he consents at once to this off-hand arrangement of his friend, and resigns himself without a murmur to his imprisonment, with the many parades, inspections, and other duties, enforced by the rigid discipline of the Dancing Hussars.

The truth is, Walter Brooke, the most popular, and indeed, as it is sometimes called, *par excellence*, the "show" man of his regiment, had obtained over none of his comrades so complete and unquestioned an influence as over Rags. To imitate, as far as circumstances permitted, his pattern's dress, walk, manner, tastes, pursuits, and sentiments, was the one study of Ragman de Rolle's life. It was a failure, of course. All such imitations are, and indeed the honest, good-humoured Cornet was perhaps less than most men fitted to engraft upon his own sturdy person, and frank disposition, the air of a somewhat spoilt dandy, and what is called a finished man of the world. Rags was a good fellow enough, not bright, nor quick-witted, but with a certain plodding sense of right, and nice feeling of honour, that guided his conduct as safely as any amount of worldly wisdom. Of old family, as his name implied, his grandfather and father had both been in trade, bringing to their business much of the energy, and a spice of the adventurous spirit, that distinguished their mail-clad ancestors. Consequently, they made money fast, and all they had they left to Rags. A cornet, even in a crack cavalry regiment, whose income is numbered by thousands, finds himself a very rich man, and liable to be spoilt by adulation outside the barrack-gates, although to do them justice, the mere possession of wealth affects his popularity very little amongst his brother officers within. Nevertheless, if he is of a free, good-humoured and

jovial character, it is not to be supposed that a balance at his bankers' is likely to lower him in their favour, and Rags, as he was universally called, found the path of life made very smooth and easy for him, rolled, as it were, and gravelled, with plenty of ripe fruit and blooming flowers to pluck by the way.

Like many others, he was scarcely aware of his own advantages. From his mother, a comely Scotchwoman of the middle class, he inherited a considerable amount of diffidence and rather large hands and feet, to equalise, perhaps, the enviable gifts of an even temper and a faultless digestion. He was not much at home in the drawing-room; but quite in his element in the barrack-yard. It was told of him, that on one occasion, sitting between two fine ladies in a tent at an archery meeting, and finding nothing to say to either, he laid down knife and fork submissively, and looking from one to the other, thus appealed to both in the plaintive accents of despair, "Can't ye speak to a fellow?" Being very fine ladies, they were amused, and therefore delighted with him, encouraging and making much of him during the rest of the afternoon—vowing he was an original and a quiz. But the last accusation fell harmless; for those who knew him ever so little, felt there could be no deception about Rags. Dull, honest, sincere, jovial, and good-tempered, his character is best summed up in his own avowal of his tastes and predilections.

"I ain't much of a ladies' man, I know," quoth Rags, when taxed with disinclination to female society. "I'm more at home with men, ye see. I hope I should run straight anywhere; but I like soldiering—I like barracks. I like my cool bottle of claret and my weed after dinner, and a mess-table suits me down to the ground." So he did his duty, rode with his squadron, and smoked his cigar in great comfort and content; firmly persuaded that life had nothing better to offer than the good opinion of his brother officers, and speedy promotion to a troop in the Dancing Hussars.

Walter Brooke, puffing the short pipe with his back to the fire, was a very different person in every respect from his easy-going friend. When I say he was the most popular man in the regiment, I do not mean that he was the most beloved; but that his opinion carried more weight, and his personal influence was greater than that of anyone else, from the war-worn old Colonel, browned and bleached by an Indian sun, and counting nearly as many wounds as he

had clasps and medals on his brave old breast—to the Paymaster, twenty stone in weight, never known to be out of humour, and, from his very duties, an official with whom it was important to be on the most friendly terms. Either of these, and indeed many other members of the corps, had won more affection; but none commanded so much admiration as Walter Brooke. I believe this secret was his: whatever he did, he had the knack of making it appear he could do better if he chose. There was a quiet, matter-of-course consciousness of superiority in his manner: perhaps the result of natural audacity and self-reliance; perhaps assumed from motives of calculation, by one who was shrewd enough to know that in society the world assesses a man at his own valuation, which led people to think there was considerable power latent in Brooke's character, only wanting opportunity to display itself; that he had it "*in* him, sir!" so they said, "and some day it would come *out*." When people talk thus, they are prepared for a very favourable judgment. It enhances their own penetration, and everybody likes to nod sagaciously, yet not without triumph, and say, "I told you so!"

Walter Brooke was careful never to over-do the thing. He was no boaster, but by inference — no swaggerer, save by implication. He seemed to say less than he knew, and to mean more than he said. Generally cool, always collected, neither subject to the influence of bodily caloric nor mental excitement, he had the credit of steadier nerves and a better temper than he really possessed. Decidedly good-looking—at least so the women said—he enjoyed the further advantage of a figure, which coats and other articles of attire fitted of their own accord, while his hands and feet seemed made on purpose for the gloves and boots he wore. Walter spent less money on his personal adornment than any other young man in the regiment—and not a tithe of what Rags did—yet they admitted unanimously (and this is no mild panegyric), that for all external qualifications, either in or out of uniform, Brooke was "quite the hussar!" The men were not perhaps so fond of him as the officers. He was aware of this, and it annoyed him, for he knew that his inferiors are nicer judges of a gentleman than his equals. It may be that in his intercourse with them, more opportunities arise for testing the true politeness which comes from the heart; it may be that they place their standard higher, as not aspiring to reach it themselves; but the coarser, commoner clay seems always very ready to detect flaws in the porcelain; and if you must

needs set up a golden image, and would prove the brightness and purity of the metal, find out how it looks from below.

So Rags agreed to do Walter's duty, and bade him draw the other easy-chair to the fire, and smoke at his ease, asking him hospitably, at the same time, "Whether he wouldn't take anything to drink?"

His friend seemed somewhat restless, and not in the best humour. Ignoring the invitation both for rest and refreshment, he stood with his back to the fire and puffed savagely at the short pipe during several seconds, then he broke out—

"What a wretched day's sport! How infernally they mismanage the whole thing now that the governor is laid up. Not that it was much better in *his* time, with their ridiculous fancies about the tenants and the ground game. Old Half-cock's superannuated. It's time he was pensioned off, or shot, or put out of the way somehow. I tell you, Rags, we ought to have had five hundred pheasants to-day in those coverts, if they were properly looked after. I was quite ashamed (though I've nothing to do with it), when I saw you fellows on the patch of mangold-wurzel at the end of the fox covert. The few pheasants there were went back, and you had only one rocketer, only *one*, I'll swear, for I saw it."

"And I missed him," said Rags good-humouredly; who, to do him justice, could usually make good practice with his breechloader, even at rocketers.

"And you missed him," repeated the other, with rather a contemptuous smile; adding, between a volley of little short, angry puffs, "It always will be so, as long as Jack has the management. Jack won't listen to anybody. Jack won't go anywhere to see how the thing ought to be done. Jack don't even like my bringing out two guns. It's perfectly ridiculous in these days; but Jack is so painfully slow."

"Well, I thought we had some pretty shooting enough," interposed Rags, uneasily divided between his natural spirit of contentment and the impossibility of thinking differently from his friend. "I had very good fun with the rabbits in the copsewood; and, by Jove! Walter, that's something like beer, that stuff you gave us at luncheon."

"Oh! of course, if you go in for beer," answered the other, with a sneer, "it's a different thing. You had better take a share in the brewery with that precious Mr. Stoney they always think it necessary to ask to Bridlemere. What the governor sees in him is more than I can tell. Jack is hand-

in-glove with him, of course; he's just such another fellow himself."

"He's not half a bad shot," said honest Rags, thinking the while of a certain woodcock between the trees which Philip had turned over in very workmanlike style.

"He's not half a good one," replied Walter. "Besides, the fellow's a snob. The governor used to be more particular when we were boys. I don't mean to say there's any harm in Stoney; but he's in trade, my good fellow, don't you see? he's in trade!"

"Oh, of course! Exactly!" answered poor Rags, who had not the courage to confess he thought none the worse of him for that. "You must draw the line somewhere, I suppose. Don't you dine with us to-night, Walter?" he added, getting off the treacherous ground as quick as he could; for Rags was very sensitive on the subject of birth—a weakness probably inherited from a plebeian mother, rather than from a long line of male ancestors who were paladins in plate-armour centuries before the Brookes of Bridlemere had ever been heard of.

"Not to-night," answered his friend, kicking the coals into a flame with the heel of his neat shooting-boot. "Waywarden expects me to dinner, and I daresay will give me a pretty good one; though he's never had what I call a real cook since Ravigotte left. I wish you were coming, Rags; old Waywarden's a capital fellow, and shows a good deal of proper feeling about claret. My lady is always pleasantest in a small party; and Lady Julia's a nice girl enough, though it's the fashion to abuse her. I wish you were coming; we could ride over together."

Rags devoutly wished it too. All this being interpreted, meant—"I, Walter Brooke, with my advantages of birth, manner, impudence, and appearance, hold a position, to which you, Ragman de Rolle, cannot aspire. Tollesdale is one of the great houses, with its indispensable accessories of magnificence, exclusiveness, and a French cook. Its mistress is one of the few fine ladies left; rejoicing, after the manner of her kind, in a pomp of dignified inanity, and a reign of terrorism, supported by the cowardice of the oppressed. The daughter of the house, I suppose, would hardly condescend to admit the existence of a fellow like you—a mere subaltern of light dragoons, unacknowledged by St. James's Street, and only known in Pall Mall to the messenger of the Army and Navy Club. Yet, behold! I am at home in these enchanted regions. I can criticise the

claret, and find fault with the dinners. I can brave the crushing manners of the mother, and even speak of the daughter with half-pitying approval, and charitable allowances for her failings. I am one of them. Don't you envy me? You are not!"

Rags did envy him; though, to do him justice, it was less for the pleasures of the evening than the morrow. Nay, had he been invited, he could probably have been induced to face Lady Waywarden's drawing-room only by the anticipation of the following day's sport amongst the belts and hedgerows of the home farm at Tollesdale, and the hot corner in the park, at the back of the keeper's house.

This young man, you see, had not passed the period of life when field-sports, in some dispositions, seem to be an absolute necessity of existence. In later years, though even old blood boils and thrills under the influence of a rattling gallop amongst large fences, or at the ringing of shots and cheer of beaters, in a deep, stately woodland, gaudy with the red, russet, and deep brown hues of Autumn's last caress, these pleasures are taken sparingly as they come, and at least with an outward show of sobriety and moderation; but in the morning of life, when the bloom is rosy on the cheek, and the beard soft on the chin, to miss a good day's shooting by some untoward accident—to be stopped hunting by an untimely frost; these are disappointments which the untried philosophy of inexperience accepts with a frank avowal of vexation and disgust.

Despite a wholesome fear of the ladies, Rags would have liked nothing better than to order portmanteau and breech-loaders to be got ready for Tollesdale.

"How are you going?" he asked, after a pause, during which, for the hundredth time that week, he had been wishing that he could change places with Walter Brooke. "I can lend you my trap, if you like. It's a darkish night, and Belter says it's beginning to rain. Sober John will get you there under the hour."

"Sober John has quite enough to do, grinding about the country with his master," answered Walter, who never scrupled to avail himself of that useful animal when he wanted him. "And as for his getting there by dinner-time, why, Rags, if you'll give me five minutes' start, and lay me three to two, I'll undertake to beat him on foot, and trundle a hoop before me the whole way! No. I shall canter Jack's cob over, and send him back to Bridlemere in the morning."

"But won't your brother want him?" said good-natured

Rags. "I heard him talk of riding somewhere to-morrow, while we were at luncheon. I can lend him one of mine, if he likes, you know, as I shall be doing your duty."

"Oh! never mind Jack," answered the younger brother, filling his pipe, and preparing for a start. "We've some long distances next week; we shall want all the hacks. Jack don't mind; he'll walk. Jack's a capital walker. Good-night, old fellow; I must make running, for I'm late as it is."

So Walter Brooke groped his way down the dark staircase to the door, where brother Jack's pony stood in waiting, held by an unbraced and bare-armed dragoon. He was in the saddle, and away without loss of time, the man looking after him with a grim, half-doubtful approval, as the pony's hoofs clattered out of the barrack-gate, and down the slippery, ill-paved street. Walter would have ridden his own horse, or even one belonging to Rags, carefully over such ground, however much he might have been hurried, but he had accustomed himself to treat everything of his elder brother with a recklessness, which arose not so much from want of proper feeling as from the generous character and utter unselfishness of the owner. Whatever belonged to Jack Brooke was at the service of everyone who wanted it. Such a disposition need not go beyond its own family circle to indulge its peculiar weakness. Jack seldom had a shilling in his pocket, or a good coat to his back; to-morrow he must trudge many a mile through the muddy lanes, because Walter, with plenty of horses at command, had borrowed his pony for a mere whim of his own, and Jack, though justly prizing the animal, never dreamt for a moment of saying "No."

It was a good pony, no doubt, and sure-footed, as Walter could not but admit, whilst rattling it fifteen miles an hour down hill, on the stones; nevertheless, for all his hurry, he too paused when he arrived at the bridge, looking wistfully, even as Philip Stoney had done, over the parapet, listening to the murmuring wind, and the quiet lapping of the waters.

For a few moments he seemed lost in thought, and laid the rein on the pony's neck; then, ere he tightened it once more, and gave the animal a hint to go on, he spoke aloud—

"Rum girl, Nell! Wish she'd marry Rags. Yet I don't know how we should get on without her at Bridlemere. Somehow, it wouldn't seem like home without Nell!"

CHAPTER III

THE BROOKES

NELL, all unconscious, was playing the pianoforte the while, by the light of a wood fire, glowing and crackling under the ample chimneypiece of the old library, at Bridlemere. The old library that—because it had never been intended for the purpose—had gradually become the favourite sitting-room of the whole house. It was very lofty, with deep narrow windows, looking on a little sheltered flower-garden, with oak floor and wainscoting; with a ceiling in sufficiently bad taste, on which the different coats-of-arms of the Brookes were picked out in scarlet and gold—perhaps I ought to say, "gules and or." The bookcases at Bridlemere were not so well furnished as the cellars; and large gaps on their shelves, which should have been filled with intellectual food, were littered with fly-hooks, fishing-tackle, work-boxes, backgammon boards, battledores, shuttlecocks, and such miscellaneous articles as are apt to accumulate in any large room of a country-house to which young ladies and gentlemen habitually resort. Bridlemere was an overgrown, old-fashioned building—partly of the Restoration, partly of Queen Anne's time—and had little pretension to regularity of architecture or arrangement. The dining-room was the smallest and the worst on the ground floor; the drawing-room the prettiest and the coldest. The best bedrooms were ghostly, and uncomfortable to a degree—much too large, and in sad want of new furniture; while in the Bachelors' Gallery, as it was called, a guest might find himself in the cosiest and neatest of retreats, bright with French paper and flowering chintz, replete with every appliance for cleanliness and comfort, fragrant with the woodbine that trailed and twined about the window, and commanding an uninterrupted view of the tops of some elms, an ivy-covered tower, and the broad face of the stable clock. It is pleasant to lie in bed in such a room as this, and watch the rooks wheeling against an April sky; listening to their cawing through the open window, and look-

ing forward to a day of happy country idleness—only happy and enjoyable when earned by a previous period of honest anxiety and toil. Below stairs, doubtless, Bridlemere was cheerful enough—the servants took care of that. For good fires and strong tea, commend me to the steward's room and the servants' hall; but, certainly, the darkest and gloomiest apartment in the whole house was that in which the family chose habitually to reside.

They might have made it a little more cheerful, too, with a few prints or pictures, of which there was no want in other parts of the building; prints representing many a spirited scene of country and sporting life. Dogs and deer from Landseer, that you could not look at for five minutes without feeling the wild breeze off the heather, and fancying you smelt the peat smoke. Horses from Rosa Bonheur, snorting lifelike in the playfulness of wanton fear; or cattle coming out of their frames with meek wistful eyes, and wet healthy muzzles, and the dew of morning glistening on their shaggy russet hides. Pictures, too, of many a periwigged gallant, and tight-waisted dame; the gentleman invariably thrusting on public notice a pale and slender hand; the lady displaying with much liberality a long white neck and bosom. But none of these were admitted to the library, perhaps lest they should withdraw the visitors' attention from its great pictorial *chef-d'œuvre* and work of art—The Family Tree of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

It was all very well for the Craddocks of Caradoc, now Dukes of Merthyr-Tydvil and Severnside, Earls of Caradoc and Lionesse, Barons Bonspiel in the Peerage of Scotland, and all the rest of it, whose ancestors sat with King Arthur at his Round Table, and held their heads high even then, as having come in with King Cole, to look down in pitying condescension on the antiquity of the Brookes. It was all very well for Lord Waywarden, of the illustrious race of Treadwell (the first Treadwell ennobled was bootmaker to Charles the Second), to assume a priority over the Brookes, as his rank entitled him, at all county meetings or social gatherings; and for Lady Waywarden to speak of them as "very good sort of people, whom she was always delighted to see"—which she was *not*. The Brookes, I say, esteemed their own pedigree infinitely superior to what they considered the fabulous ancestry of the duke, and the mercantile origin of the earl. To be a Brooke was with them tantamount to a diploma, vouching not only for birth, but for beauty, talent, manners, probity, all the advantages, external and internal, that are

assumed, like gout, to be transmitted from one generation to another through the blood.

The Family Tree, however, on examination, scarcely afforded sufficient reason for inordinate pride of birth. Notwithstanding that in its many roots, suckers, and ramifications, it resembled that redundant plant, the araucaria, called irreverently the "puzzle-monkey"—notwithstanding that it required much practice, a clear head, and a sharp-pointed pencil besides, to follow out all the marriages and intermarriages of the different shoots, terminating too often in a little open circle like a medal, with some barren spinster's name solitary in the midst—notwithstanding that the attention was much distracted from its main trunk, by foreign grafts and excrescences allied to houses, which again were allied to royalty, it seemed pretty clear that the family knew little about their origin prior to the appearance of a certain Sir Geoffrey Brooke, who did good service in the cause of royalty during the Rebellion, and would have assuredly been killed or taken prisoner with his stand of pikes at Marston Moor, had he not run away, like many another gallant Cavalier, when the action became too hot for him.

From an old yellow letter—of which the ribbon that once fastened it, according to the fashion of the time, though much worn and frayed, was in better preservation than any other part of the missive—it appeared that Sir Geoffrey, before going into battle, had commended to the care of his loyal wife and sweetheart, to whom it was addressed, his poor old father, under the title of a simple yeoman and franklin, giving thanks to Heaven, at the same time, with quaint and sincere self-gratulation for his own advancement in life. This letter, though carefully preserved, was nevertheless ignored by the family, who preferred a far-fetched theory of their own regarding Sir Geoffrey's origin, and affected to consider him as a younger branch of the Devonshire De Brokes, hereditary grand posset-bearers to the Plantagenet kings, and found in old charters seised of certain fiefs and manors, now lapsed to the Crown.

They might have been satisfied, nevertheless, with their own Sir Geoffrey as he stood—an honest, God-fearing old Cavalier, who stuck to church and sceptre, fought as well as his neighbours, and swore by Prince Rupert, who lived to see "the king enjoy his own again," and to win for himself, though history does not explain how, a goodly tale of rich acres in the vicinity of Middlesworth, where he built the oldest and least commodious parts of the house now standing,

and died in it at something over four-score—the first of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

The Court of the Merry Monarch, with its reckless pursuit of pleasure, its taste for meretricious display, and its unbounded licence of manners, served to ruin the fortunes of such Royalist families as did not succeed in obtaining places or monopolies under its patronage, quite as surely, and almost as rapidly as reverses at Edge Hill and Naseby, or fines inflicted by the Parliament and the Protector. Rank, in a second generation, has at all times been prone to affect the pomps and vanities, rather than the duties of its position. Sir Egremont, son to Sir Geoffrey, shook the dice at Whitehall, and ran short-tailed horses at Newmarket, to a tune which levelled half the West Avenue, and melted away many a score of fat acres round Bridlemere. There was a picture of him over the dining-room sideboard, representing a handsome, but clownish and sullen-looking man, with a periwig, a breastplate, and a tall glass of wine in his hand (artist unknown), which formed a striking contrast to the likeness of his father by his side, whose weather-beaten, war-worn visage was depicted simpering under his steel head-piece, turned carelessly away from a dirty-faced page, a fore-shortened charger, and a general action raging furiously in the background. Sir Egremont not only dissipated his property, but also married his dairymaid, and thus on the first opportunity struck a deadly blow at the aristocratic pretensions of his house.

The dairymaid had a large progeny of daughters, branching out, indeed, all over the genealogical tree; some wedded to diverse plebeian surnames; some dying like ungathered roses on the parent stem. The property now passed into possession of a family named Brown, and a stranger could not commit a greater solecism, nor put a deeper affront on either race, than to confuse the Browns and the Brookes of Bridlemere.

One of Sir Egremont's married daughters, however, must have preserved her patronymic; for in George the First's reign, and after the Browns had added a wing and put their mansion into thorough repair, a young Dorcas Brooke appears on the stage as the last remaining scion of her name, and to Dorcas Brooke appertains a pretty little romance, commemorated among the archives of her family by a bad picture in oils, and a long account in manuscript.

This young lady, it appears, dwelt with her aunt and uncle by marriage, the latter a saddler and harness-maker in the City. She seems to have been a fair young lady, and an

amiable, also more venturous than other damsels of her class, inheriting, perhaps, something of old Sir Geoffrey's energy and resolution of character.

London, in the reign of George the First, was not safe to walk about in at night as it is now; there were Mohocks in those days, as there have been garotters since. Perhaps, too, the anti-Mohocks, like the anti-garotters, contributed largely to the general confusion after dark. A nervous passenger would whip his sword out, fancying he was going to be attacked, and become himself the occasion of the very brawl he dreaded, as in later times we have heard of impulsive gentlemen who would run a-muck with life-preservers and knuckle-dusters, persuaded that the stranger humbly asking his way was some perfidious brigand, scientific in grip as a Thug, and backed by a swarm of confederate assassins round the corner.

The Mohocks, however, were the greater pest to the public, that they slew and maltreated people for sheer amusement. To be drunk with wine by two o'clock in the day; to keep it up with bowls of steaming punch and cups of burnt brandy during the afternoon; to "crack t'other bottle," as it was called, at supper, and then sally forth for the express purpose of insulting women, stabbing men, and beating the watch, was the correct routine of a blood's life in those fine old-fashioned times, which some people, I understand, can still be found to regret.

Dorcas Brooke, however, was a good little girl enough, coquettish, it may be, and not averse to admiration, yet none the less womanly and kind-hearted for these natural failings of her sex, and Dorcas Brooke was not to be deterred by all the Mohocks in London from regular attendance at a sewing society in the next street, held twice a week, for the purposes of conversation and charity, retailing gossip, and furnishing the indigent with clothes. Wrapped in her muffler, a pretty white hand peeping out to clasp it round her throat, and her dainty feet tripping lightly over the mud, from gutter to gutter, Dorcas went backwards and forwards from her home to her sewing society, without taking much notice of the admiration, generally expressed with oaths, that she called forth. One tall man, in a cloak, watched her regularly for a fortnight; and so did a shorter, squarer, sturdier person, of less aristocratic exterior, only she did not remark the latter. The tall man ventured to accost her before long, and although she was greatly shocked at the liberty, how do we know that it was so very disagreeable, after all, or that she had not

implied, as damsels will, by some almost imperceptible hitch of her garments, some unnecessary adjustment of her veil—"If you follow me, I shall be angry; if you speak to me, I shall scream! and yet I shall be a little disappointed if you don't do both!" The tall man, however, was a Mohock when required. The third week he had a hackney-coach waiting, and a couple of ruffians ready to help his prey into the vehicle. She was a light weight; a shawl would gag her pretty mouth and easily stifle her cries. It was but lifting her in, and the thing was done. Such trifles took place nightly in that golden age. It was, therefore, well for Dorcas that she had another follower, watchful and unsuspected, of less aristocratic appearance, but of honester nature, stiffly built withal, and holding a good oak cudgel in his hand.

These affrays are soon over. There was a piercing whistle; a scuffling of feet; a hoarse, suppressed voice muttered, "My darling, I won't hurt you!" and a shrill, angry one screamed out, "Let me go, sir! Help! Murder! Let"— Then one of the ruffians went down on the stones, with the blood streaming from his sconce, the rapier flew in shivers out of the tall man's grasp, and the saddler's apprentice flourished his cudgel between Dorcas and her assailant, executing a war-dance in the mud that bade defiance to a legion, and hallooing for the watch with might and main the while. The tall man took to his heels and fled; the fallen accomplice lay senseless where he fell; his comrade jumped on the box with the hackney-coachman, and drove off. The watch never came at all, and Dorcas walked silently home with her uncle's apprentice, longing to thank him heartily, but not daring to speak, for she knew she should burst out crying directly if she ventured to open her lips. Nor was her champion one whit less taciturn. Bayard might have been more courtly in manner, but not more chivalrous at heart. Also, in the presence of Dorcas, he was shy, mute, and awkward. Her aunt thought him a poor creature, so she said, "easily dashed, and for all his broad shoulders he hasn't the heart of a chicken; not he! Now look at Dorcas; the spirit of the girl! But then, to be sure, she's a Brooke!" It is my own opinion that neither of its participators alluded to the evening's adventure or its termination, after Dorcas said "Good-night! Oh, thank you!" at the street-door, and hurried upstairs for the good cry that could be delayed no longer. Nevertheless, there must have been thereafter a tacit understanding between the two; and, I daresay, at meals, the only times they met,

the apprentice would raise his eyes timidly to seek the girl's, and avert them the instant they caught her glance.

It is obvious that when two people are at opposite ends of a line, and wish to meet at a given point, one must take the initiative, and move in the desired direction, if it be but an inch at a time. To do women justice, they shrink sensitively from thus commencing operations, and as long as there is a chance of the advance originating with the adversary, they are as retiring as the snail within its shell; but when the lover so far forgets his masculine prerogative of solicitation as to remain a longing devotee rather than a brisk assailant (and it is provoking to reflect that the truer his affection, the less it seems to sue for a return), why then, rather than that the game should languish altogether, and die out for want of players, she will emerge cautiously, gradually, yet very obviously, from her reserve, and give him to understand that she is neither so coy, nor so indifferent, nor so hard-hearted as he seems to believe. The saddler's apprentice must have gathered a deal of encouragement from his master's niece, in the shape of stolen glances and approving smiles, ere he could summon courage to offer her his escort on the river, when she took boat at Whitefriars for a voyage into the country as far as Westminster. That her aunt made no objections is only to be accounted for on that principle which, in all ages and societies, has trusted the cat to keep the cream. In the present instance, the cream was not the least afraid of the cat; and the latter, although an inexperienced mouser, was delighted with its charge.

There could be but one result to such an expedition. The waterman, a staunch Hanoverian, full of ale and loyalty, ran them aground in some three feet of water. Dorcas, losing her footing and her presence of mind simultaneously, upset the wherry with much dexterity, and the apprentice, in a laced waistcoat, knee-breeches, and full-skirted coat, waded with his dripping burden to the bank, and felt his head swim with a vague delirious happiness when he imprinted his first kiss on her pretty lips, while she clasped her arms round his neck, and vowed he was her defender and preserver, and had saved her a second time from death. The waterman, who was too drunk to walk ashore, was in most danger of the three; nevertheless, the young people, ignoring the shallowness of the river, voted it a rescue, and henceforth became avowed sweethearts, only waiting for an opportunity to declare themselves.

So presently the apprentice was "out of his time," and,

earning good wages, married his master's niece, who thus exchanged the cherished patronymic of Brooke for the less noble name of Housings—an exchange that only lasted till the next generation, for Master Housings, in some forty years' practice, amassed a large fortune by the leather trade, and pretty Dorcas lived to see her grandfather's roof over her head, and was buried in the country churchyard at Bridlemere. It was, perhaps, her aunt's untiring influence that stimulated this prosperous London tradesman to purchase the acres she persisted in terming his wife's ancestral property—an influence none the weaker that she never neglected to remind him of his inferior birth during her lifetime, and left him a good round sum of money at her death. Master Housings and his Dorcas ended their days then at Bridlemere (Lord Waywarden maintains even now that the place was so called to commemorate the saddler's employment; but such an assertion is directly refuted by the title-deeds of this estate, held by one Brown), and their children, by royal licence, took the name and arms of the Brookes of Bridlemere.

Two or three succeeding squires drew their rents and drank their port in the old house without becoming in any way remarkable. The last bought pictures; and the present, till his health failed him, kept hounds. Both succeeded in impoverishing their estate, and the energy of another Sir Geoffrey, or the good sense of another Master Housings, was beginning to be wanted for the repair of the family fortunes. Nevertheless, the Brookes held a high station amongst the county people. They could go back honestly to Sir Geoffrey, and, by a perverse train of reasoning common to mankind, descent is the more valued the farther off it is from an illustrious ancestor, and, consequently, the less there is of his blood in the veins of his posterity. The present squire, like the others, was above all things proud of being a Brooke. As he watched the firelight flickering on Nell's black braided hair, crimsoning her sweet pale forehead, and throwing a saffron tinge on the keys of the pianoforte, from which her white hands were pressing out a low, pleading, mournful symphony, dwelling, as if they loved it, on each sad harmonious chord, he was not thanking God, who gave him, in his helpless age, the love of such a daughter, but congratulating himself rather on the two stalwart sons, who should perpetuate in the male line the Brookes of Bridlemere. Helen was a good girl, no doubt—a good girl and a bonny one—but it was well, he thought, that he had nearly twelve

feet of manhood, besides, to look to, lest the race might become extinct.

The squire had been a stalwart, well-grown man, in his prime — could cheer his hounds and ride his horses with unfailing lungs and vigorous dexterity. There were old women about the place now, still hale and hearty, who remembered "his eyes as bright as diamonds, bless you! and his hair as black as your hat. Such a hearty, well-limbed man as our squire was, and a free gentleman, too; with a word for everybody — gentle and simple, rich and poor"; whilst an old-fashioned attorney in Middlesworth, with a red nose and white neckcloth, quoted Squire Brooke, as "the best judge of port wine in the country; but a careful man of his health, always, and an abstemious, never taking more than his one bottle a day!" He had been a good shot, of course; an active, but somewhat pig-headed magistrate, and an invaluable auxiliary at all agricultural dinners, cattle-shows, and such public gatherings of the landed interest and its supporters.

Now he could not walk across the room without assistance. Powerless below the waist, his arms and shoulders still retained something of their former vigorous mould, and there was brightness in his eye, and colour in his cheek still; but his hair and whiskers had turned white since his attack, and he betrayed, at times, a querulous irritability foreign to his character, denoting too plainly the approach of a general break-up. One doctor called it rheumatism; another, suppressed gout; a third thought that his liver was affected, and a fourth considered the general system too low in tone. Nobody sent for a strange practitioner, lest he should blurt out the right name, and declare it paralysis. It would have been a friendly deed—it would have been the action of a kind and brave man to tell Squire Brooke the truth. It seems hard that the wayfarer should be the last person warned of his inevitable journey—should never know he is going to start till the long narrow box is as good as ordered and ready for packing—till the horses are actually pawing and snorting in his hearse.

The squire sat in the warmth of the chimney-corner; a newspaper lay beside him; but from the habits of his old active life, he never read it till evening. He was dressed in an out-of-doors costume, with his poor helpless legs incased in stout shooting-boots and gaiters. His hat neatly brushed, his gloves carefully folded, his stick ready to support him, were placed within reach on a chair by his side. Every

morning Helen went through the same routine, unvaried now for months. After breakfast, she looked at the thermometer, and told her father the exact temperature (he was very particular about this); then at the barometer, and recorded its changes: setting it by his directions with great care. Then she went out at the hall-door, wet or dry, and furnished her own report of the atmosphere, seldom tallying with that afforded by the mercury. This performance accomplished, the squire would say, "Helen, my dear, I've a good deal to do at the home farm; but I think I shall not go out till the afternoon."

At first she liked to hear him talk so, for it gave her hope. After a time, when he got no better, she would turn away to conceal her tears. At last, she became used to this as to other distressing symptoms, and grew to consider it as one of the details—nor indeed the most trying one—of her father's illness and her own daily duties. She had plenty to attend to—calls for the exercise of thoughtfulness, patience, and self-denial, every hour of the day. Her brothers consulted Nell in all their complications of stables, kennel, or other opportunities for mismanagement. She was expected to remember their engagements, and get them out of their difficulties of forgetfulness or incivility. She had to sew the buttons on their gloves, and keep them supplied with stationery, stamps, paper-lights, and other miscellaneous articles which men seem to think grow of their own accord in sleeping and sitting rooms, like daisies in a May meadow-ground. Moreover, they asked her advice in every conceivable dilemma, and never took it on any subject whatever.

Then the servants came to Miss Helen for orders, bringing her, in return, complaints of overcharge from the tradesmen, and reports of each other's shortcomings, which they thought it "their duty to name," but which could never be substantiated on further inquiry, and poured in her ready ear many a dolorous statement with which they would not venture "to trouble the squire." She had lost her mother several years before, and Helen was well accustomed to a position which demands, more than any other, the qualities of tact and good temper, namely, the acceptance of responsibility without authority.

But it was as a daughter that the girl shone in her brightest lustre. She had always been devoted to papa, from the time when she used to toddle after him on sturdy little bare legs, round the home farm, tumbling about sadly

amongst the turnips, and holding tight by his forefinger in the straw-yard, where dwelt those huge horned monsters that visited her in her dreams. From those early days, when she thought him the noblest, the wisest, and the most gigantic of men, till now that she knew herself the prop and mainstay of the poor bleached, withered old cripple, she had never wavered one hair's-breadth in her affection, though year by year it changed its character, progressing through the successive phases of admiration, confidence, anxiety, pity, and protecting love.

The squire accepted it all, as, if men were wise, they would be careful ever to accept the devotion of the other sex, with a lofty royal condescension, that seemed to expect attachment and homage as a right.

Loyalty, I think, must be a special characteristic of womanhood. They seldom rebel till the monarch himself shows symptoms of weakness or abdication. What taxes, too, will they not bear, so long as he imposes them with a firm and temperate hand? Whilst he remains on the daïs, they are the sincerest, though the subtlest of courtiers; but let him not descend to meet them on an equal footing in the hall; and if he place them on a pedestal above his own level, woe betide him! He will surely find that the pretty head turns giddy with elevation, and the little feet can trample hard and heavy on the prostrate ruler who has voluntarily yielded up his natural sway.

The squire had accustomed himself to be tended and nursed, and waited on by his child, till it seemed only natural that all Helen's pleasures, amusements, and pursuits should give way to every whim of the invalid. She seldom left him for more than a couple of hours at a time, and nobody knew how often she had denied herself a ball, a picnic, or an archery meeting, lest the worn face in the arm-chair should look wistfully round for her and find her not — lest the querulous voice complaining from habit to Helen, should become more querulous and irritable because she was beyond hearing of its wail.

The country people voted Miss Brooke a little shy, and a little proud. It may be she *had* a spice of both these failings. On the few occasions when she *did* appear, the young men fell in love at first sight; but after a quadrille, or a dinner-party, became somewhat afraid of her, confiding to each other in elegant figures of speech, that she was "a clever-shaped one; but *slow*, and not much *in* her." Nevertheless, it might be seen, by the earnest way they took

their hats off when she bowed — which she did somewhat haughtily, I admit—that they liked her to notice them. The ladies were less outspoken in their decision. They had "heard she was a very nice girl. For their own part, they shouldn't call her exactly handsome." It is needless, therefore, to observe, that Miss Brooke's exterior was sufficiently pleasing in the eyes of the other sex.

She was a stately looking young woman. She carried herself naturally in a more queenly fashion than is usual with a country gentleman's daughter. She possessed what is called a very thorough-bred air—not that this advantage is by any means monopolised by our aristocracy—and her reserved manner was probably much increased by the life she led, and her habit of thinking for everyone in the house. Her head and neck were extremely well put on, particularly when you saw her *en profile*. She could look very high and mighty when she drew herself up, which she was apt to do from shyness oftener than was necessary; but when she bent over her work, or stooped down to caress a dog or a child, there was something very gentle and womanly in her gestures, that accorded well with the expression of her fair low forehead, and the gentle, trustful look in her large dark eyes. Hers was not one of those faces which derive so much beauty, and that too of a very fascinating kind, from brilliancy of colouring and mobility of feature. Helen was nearly always pale, and so calm she was almost severe; but if in an unguarded moment a thought or feeling was permitted to express itself unreservedly on her face, men turned their eyes quickly away, and as quickly looked at her again, in the instinctive homage the boldest cannot but pay to a high type of feminine attraction.

Had she been more liberal of her smiles, she might have easily claimed the championship — if I may use such an expression — in every ballroom of the shire. Had she looked at any other man as she did now from under her long dark eyelashes at her father, down he must have come, I think, unless shortsighted, or lately married, or very deeply pre-engaged — down like a wild bird, shot deftly under the wing, wounded and fluttering, and helpless at her feet!

She closed the pianoforte, and came round, still with that smile on her face, to her father's chair. Whatever Helen did was done noiselessly; her dress never rustled, and she could even read the newspaper without crackling it. "Papa," she said, "let us put off the Dacres and the Stoneys.

There will be plenty of time for me to write a line now, before the post goes."

The squire struck both hands angrily against the arms of his chair, making a movement as if he would get upon his feet — "Put off the Dacres and the Stoneys, Helen! Good gracious! what are you dreaming of? Why on earth do you suppose I asked them if I'm to put them off? You don't think I am *worse*, do you?"

His voice shook painfully, but it was partly from anger. He was easily irritated now, particularly when his health was alluded to.

"Dear papa," persisted Helen, "you know Mrs. Dacre has a bad cold, and the chances are she will send an excuse at the last moment; in which case she won't let *him* come alone. Walter is gone to Tollesdale, and he never knows when he will be back; people like so to have him. You see, there would only be the Stoneys, and Jack, and I."

"Then you count *me* for nothing!" exclaimed the squire. "Considering that I have been in this cursed chair for—for—How long have I been in this cursed chair, Helen? Considering that it's *my* house, and *my* servants, and *my* wine, I think I might be permitted to sit at my own table! If the doctors think I am going to dine at two o'clock every day, they're infernally mistaken, and so I tell them! Why, it's not till Tuesday. I expect to get out to-morrow, if it's anything like a fine day; and I *must* go to the home farm on Monday at all risks. I suppose I may have some dinner after my walk, eh, Helen? Neither you nor the doctors are fools enough to forbid me that! And as this isn't till Tuesday, I expect to be nearly as well as ever I was in my life. A little heavier, perhaps, for want of exercise; but quite strong again—quite strong again."

Now, these dinner-parties were amongst the weekly trials of Helen's life. The squire persisted in asking his friends and neighbours to dine with him, as he used when he could sit at the end of his table, and carve his saddle of mutton, and drink his bottle of port. Ay, and play his rubber of whist till twelve o'clock at night. Now, early hours and complete repose were absolutely enjoined. Nor, had he been equal to the exertion of entertaining his guests, would the excitement of their society have been permitted by the doctors. Nevertheless, he would take counsel with his children whom he should ask, and with his cook what they should have for dinner; and send off invitations for a party of fourteen with far more eagerness than he ever showed

when he was strong and well. Perhaps the bustle and excitement of the project may have served to amuse him, but he was nevertheless very irritable while its arrangements were pending; very querulous and desponding the day after the feast at which he had been unable to attend.

It was no easy task for a young girl to preside and do the honours of a large party, chiefly country neighbours, neither very bright nor very sociable; but of this duty she acquitted herself wonderfully well. What Helen dreaded was the effect of these Barmecide entertainments, both past and prospective, upon her father.

It was worse, too, when Walter was away from home. That young hussar seemed to have acquired an ascendency over the squire, such as was acknowledged by his brother officers. In the presence of his second son, Mr. Brooke was ashamed to indulge the querulous habits of bad health, and assumed, as far as he could, the tone of a man of the world. A visit from Walter always seemed to do him good; but on the days he felt weakest, he declined to see him; and when he was at his worst, he liked nobody but Helen to be in the room.

"So Walter is off to Tollesdale — off to Tollesdale," repeated the squire, after a pause. "Quite right, quite right. Young men should go into society, good society, the best they can command. And the Waywardens are civil to Walter, are they? Popular fellow, Walter; twice the brains of Jack, eh, Helen? And Waywarden's a good-natured man: old friend of mine, though he never comes to see me now."

His voice dropped, for he was thinking of the days when he could beat Waywarden over a country, and shoot quicker at pheasants, and when in one of these amusements or the other they used to meet three or four times a week. He would have taken it very kindly had the latter ridden over to see him a little oftener; and his old friend would have grudged neither time nor distance, but that he fancied he should only be in the way in a sick-room, forgetting that the squire, as a Christian, loved his neighbour, and none the less when that neighbour was a peer. Mr. Brooke liked to think of Walter flourishing about amongst these grandees, riding as good horses and wearing as smart clothes as the best of them, though he never seemed to consider how these advantages were to be paid for, nor dreamt of increasing his younger son's allowance to meet the expenses such society entails.

There are many fathers who have no scruple in pushing the earthen vessel out to swim down-stream with the iron pots, and think they have a right to be angry when it breaks and fills, and sinks to rise no more. Were it not that the iron pots, as a class, are very considerate and very good-natured, these shipwrecks would occur far oftener than they do. Mr. Brooke, reflecting on his own choice piece of porcelain, began to think he should like it to be present at his dinner-party.

"Of course Walter will be back by Tuesday, Helen?" said he, more cheerfully. "We shall want his help to do the honours, and talk to the young ladies. I forget who are coming, Helen. I've got your list somewhere, but I've mislaid it. Ring the bell, dear; or, no, put a little more wood on the fire."

Helen stirred the logs into a flame, as usual, to please him; then she went over, for the twentieth time since luncheon, the roll of invited guests. The Smiths, who couldn't come; the Greens, who hadn't sent an answer; the Dacres, who were doubtful; and lastly, the Stoneys, who had accepted, with thanks.

A dinner-party in the country is apt to prove a failure from the difficulty of getting your forces together at the last moment. Like an invading army, its available strength is far less than that which it shows on paper. In London, you send out your invitations three weeks beforehand, and the invited come as solemnly, as tardily, and apparently as unwillingly, as they would to pay any other just and unavoidable debt. Moreover, the gaps between your couples are filled with professional diners-out — men who make a regular business of the thing, and whose conversation, cut fresh from the evening paper and the topics of the afternoon, will no more keep till to-morrow than the flowers in your epergne. Therefore, if they are alive, come they will, and you need fear no far-fetched excuses to disappoint you at the last moment.

I do not mean to say that the entertainment is likely to be cool, roomy, comfortable, or in any way particularly pleasant; but it is pretty sure to take place, and there is an end of it; whereas, in the country, you may lose four of your party at once on the day itself by such a trifling casualty as the breaking of a spring, or the illness of a coach-horse. If it is a frosty night, your richest elderly lady probably fails you from sheer poltroonery; if a thaw, your handsomest and most eligible young man is likely to be wading up a muddy lane with a tired hunter a dozen miles off, when he ought to

be simpering over his soup plate at your dinner-table. The undertaking is beset with difficulties; and even if it succeeds, in nine cases out of ten it proves one of the many games which are not worth the candle that lights them.

Helen never argued with nor contradicted her father. She let him run on and exhaust his petulance unopposed, returning, as it wore itself out, with the gentle persistency of woman, again and again to the attack.

"Walter will be back the end of the week," she said. "If we could put off the dinner-party, papa, we might make sure of having him to help us."

"I don't require any help!" answered the squire quickly. "Still, Walter makes himself agreeable, and brings us all the news. And you say the Dacres won't come, you think, Helen?"

"Sure not, papa," was the reply; "we all know what Mrs. Dacre's colds are: they mean, 'I won't take any trouble about anything for a fortnight.'"

The squire wavered. Still, he could not at once relinquish the idea of his dinner-party. It was a sort of *point d'appui* for his poor, weak, helpless, vacillating mind.

"But there are the Stoneys," said he; "three of them, for I told you to ask Philip particularly. Did you ask Philip particularly, Helen?"

She had turned to make the fire up again.

"Yes, papa," she answered; "I wrote him a separate note in your name."

"Three of them," mused Mr. Brooke. "I don't think we can put three of them off. It is not as if we had only asked two. What should you say, Helen? Don't you think it would seem very odd if we put three of them off?"

But Helen was firm. He had come round, as usual, to her way of thinking, by imperceptible degrees, and thought he had converted her to his own opinion. So she lit the candles on the writing-table, and sat down to her task, taking great pains, as ladies do, with the penmanship and superscription of her letters, and composing, as her father desired, a particular and separate note to Mr. Philip Stoney.

CHAPTER IV

STONEY BROTHERS

OF all the flirts in and about Middlesworth, I doubt if there was one who could bear comparison with a young lady now occupying the hearth-rug at the feet of Philip Stoney, divested of his shooting dress, clean, hungry, and waiting for the important hour of dinner. That this person was four years of age, wearing her legs bare, likewise her shoulders, and her frock in as untidy a state as constant revision by mamma and nurse would permit, is simply an aggravation of the charge, inasmuch as dishevelment and general disorder of costume did but enhance the peculiar style of coquetry which she found irresistible by many of her own, and all of the opposite sex.

Without being a pretty child, except in so far as healthy children cannot help being pretty, rosy cheeks and dancing eyes, and an impudent nose, with a profusion of curling brown hair, imparted to this little lady quite pretension enough on which to found a dynasty that had gradually usurped dominion over the whole house. That she had a Christian name I assume from presumptive sponsorial evidence, afforded by a fairy-like fork and spoon, with a red case, also a silver toast-and-water mug in her possession. But such baptismal appellation was entirely superfluous, inasmuch as nobody, in or out of the family, ever dreamed of calling her anything but Dot; and a very troublesome, quaint, and noisy little personage Dot could be, at no time more so than at the period

> Between the dark and the daylight,
> Which is called the children's hour.

Philip was warming himself (like an Englishman) at the fire. Dot sat on the hearth-rug at his feet. She brandished a pair of scissors (points blunted for family use), and was cutting a paper pattern of mamma's into a device which it had by no means been originally intended to represent.

After an unbroken silence of some thirty seconds, Dot looked up.

"Uncle Phil," said she, shaking the curls off her face, "when am I to be your wife?"

This was a matrimonial arrangement long since concluded, and now established as a matter of course by the lady, with whom, indeed, it originated.

"Not at all, Dot," answered Uncle Phil. "I am afraid of undertaking the job. I've changed my mind."

"Are you going to have another wife?" asked Dot, very graciously, and quite unmoved by her favourite's inconstancy.

Philip smiled, and smothered a sigh, while he thought how unlikely such an event was; and Dot proceeded with the utmost gravity—

"Because, mamma said this morning that Phil was too good to be a *bacheldore*, and when I asked what a bacheldore was, she said papa was one before he married. And I thought, perhaps, you would be good enough for me to be your wife very soon, and then we could go to that place you told me of, where the beasts are, like my Noah's Ark."

Dot had already a very feminine notion of a wedding trip, combining, as far as practicable, amusement with romance. Every child has its own ideal region of enchantment, and Dot's Utopia was "where the beasts were, like her Noah's Ark."

Uncle Phil sat down, and his torment, reaching his knee at a bound, proceeded to the constant and never-failing resource of opening and shutting his watch.

"We'll see about it, Dot," said he, smoothing the glossy head. "I think the beasts would all be afraid of you; you're such a little vixen."

"What's a vixen?" asked Dot. "Wind it up, Uncle Phil! What's a vixen?" she repeated, with a quick look in his face. "Is Jane one? Is mamma a vixen?"

Philip laughed outright.

"Here she comes, Dot," said he; "you had better ask her yourself."; and the words were scarcely out of his mouth, ere Dot, whose motions were like quicksilver, had made a dive at mamma, and was lost in the ample folds of that lady's gown. Anything less like a vixen than Mrs. George Stoney could hardly be imagined. She was a stout, untidy, uncomely sort of woman—motherly, to say the least, in her dress and exterior; of considerable presence, whichever way you looked at her, and generally with a large, healthy, hungry baby in her arms. She had a fine figure, so to speak, run

to seed; fine dresses, ill put on; fine hair, neither well-brushed nor carefully arranged; and fine features, which nothing could spoil. She could not have been *always* nursing, yet her appearance never failed to suggest a general idea of nutrition; and her demeanour, with its heavy, languid step, and slow imposing gestures, was a happy combination of the matronly and the imperial.

Her conversation, too, was of the same handsome, careless, untidy character as herself. She liked fine phrases, as she liked fine gowns, and used the words as inappropriately as the dresses. Even at home, she was very fond of speaking like a book, and held, that next to her maternal duties, eloquence was, of all things, to be cultivated by a woman. Fortunately, a slow delivery, and a West-country accent, prevented the torrent of her oratory from becoming overpowering; and as the miller sleeps sound through the accustomed thunder of his mill, and only wakens up when the wheel stops, so did Mr. George Stoney find himself quite undisturbed by his wife's rhetoric, answering too often, like other husbands, instinctively, and at random, without in the least comprehending the purport of a single question addressed.

With men, Mrs. Stoney was rather popular than otherwise. They admired her fine points, and laughed good-humouredly at her fine phrases, ignoring their misapplication, or setting down her mistakes, as they will, to the score of feminine ignorance and incapacity. Amongst her own sex, opinions as to her merits varied in accordance with the social standing of those who broached them. The poor thought her a "noble lady," as indeed they had good cause. The tradespeople considered "she gave herself airs to which she was not entitled"; for this class of persons only tolerate and even admire bad manners when covered with a coronet. The doctor's sister, the rector's lady, and one or two neighbouring squiresses voted her "a vulgar, trapesing woman, and just what they expected from the first"; whilst Lady Waywarden, I fear, ignored her altogether, and none the less loftily that Waywarden, some years ago, had been heard to declare at a Middlesworth ball, she was "out and out, the handsomest woman in the room!"

Mrs. George Stoney, however, permitted herself to be but little affected by the suffrages of her neighbours. What with marketing, shopping, the production and sustenance of infants, the unpicking of dresses, the supervision of servants, and the struggle for supremacy with Dot, time did

not hang heavy on her hands. All the languor she indulged in was confined to her manners, and she could bustle about below-stairs, on occasion, with a vigour and activity quite remarkable in so ample and majestic a personage. Dot was devoted to her. She herself thought she was the only person who kept Dot in order, but to this opinion the latter did by no means subscribe, and the question was tried at least half a dozen times a day, usually with the same result, a signal and complete victory on the part of the child. Philip got on admirably with his sister-in-law, perhaps for the very reason that no two people could be less alike in every respect, and, altogether, no more united family sat down to dinner in Middlesworth than that which surrounded the dining-table of the comfortable villa inhabited by Stoney Brothers.

"George is late," remarked his wife, ringing the bell with one large white hand, and imprisoning Dot with the other. "He has not been in ten minutes, but it never takes him long to make his toilet. He's an elegant figure, George; and the children take after him. He'll be here before the soup now. Dot! *will* you leave the fire-irons alone?"

Dot's attention was at this juncture fortunately arrested by the simultaneous entrance of papa, who was always an attraction, and the soup, borne by a clean, tidy-looking parlour-maid, whose connection with a certain storeroom, and the jam thereto belonging, gave her opinions considerable weight amongst the inhabitants of the nursery. It was at her instance that Dot consented to be removed, ostensibly to superintend the putting to bed of her juniors; and as the young lady was replaced by a tureen of hot soup, the three sat down to dinner in considerable comfort and tranquillity. George Stoney was several years older than his brother. He had the worn and somewhat subdued air of a man whose whole life has been spent in the toils of business, in work not adapted to his tastes, and that taxed his powers to the utmost. There are two sorts of men in trade, equally energetic, perhaps, and equally successful, but who wear their good fortune, as Ophelia says of her rue, "with a difference." Those to whom business is their natural element, thrive and grow fat upon it; they are younger and fresher men of their years than the British yeoman himself. But the others, who put their shoulders perhaps no less assiduously to the wheel, yet who cannot cheat themselves into the belief that labour and pleasure are convertible terms, who do the drudgery, and do it

thoroughly, but only because it *must* be done to pay the premiums on their life-assurances for wife and children; who stand at the desk, when they would fain be breasting a mountain, and long for the saddle, while perched high on an office stool; these men have thin hands and hollow voices, weak hair, streaked with grey before its time, a stoop in the shoulders, marked lines about the mouth, and, oh! such a wistful look in the weary, weary eyes, as if they longed so for rest that they would be content to find it even in the grave. George Stoney was active, painstaking, intelligent, but his natural element was leisure and retirement. He would, probably, have been equally successful as a scholar, had his lot been cast amongst a different kind of books from those which he compared and posted so carefully; unquestionably he would have looked ten years younger, and he would certainly have been a happier man.

Refined in character, cautious, and a little indolent of disposition, shrinking almost sensitively from everything noisy, exaggerated, or in bad taste, averse even to so much of strife as must constitute the necessary competition of trade, he was a dreamer—almost a poet in heart; though externally, in dress, manner, and habits, as prosaic a personage as it is possible even for the British merchant to be. Such a man was sure to marry a woman of far coarser mental texture than his own, and, having married her, was equally sure to abandon the reins of government to her grasp as far as she liked to possess them. Intellect, from its very nature, is too often hampered by facility of character and love of ease; such a combination cannot but give way when opposed to a firm and thick-skinned disposition; strong in its will as its affections, regardless of those nicer shades of feeling which do not practically affect its well-being, and rejoicing in that useful self-confidence which, however unwarranted, is so often justified by results. It is only fair to say, however, that in the present instance the lady confined her energies to domestic sway. She never interfered with the business, and the brewery was conducted, unquestionably, by the firm of Stoney Brothers, though inside the villa Mrs. George's word was law.

This brewery, then, well known, long established, and ministering to the thirst of more than half the villages in the county, was considered to be the best business doing in the town of Middlesworth. Its magnificent greys were to be seen at all hours resting their nose-bags to feed on each other's backs. Its waggons clattered and jingled along

the ill-paved streets, waking the echoes and shaking the windows as they rolled by. Its draymen, jolly and gigantic, were walking advertisements of the stuff on which they flourished, and "Stoney's Entire" seemed synonymous with John Barleycorn himself.

For many years the firm had done well, and amassed considerable profits in a dark, mysterious-looking building, far down a by-street, through which it was a miracle how the waggons and the greys and the draymen ever wound their way; but the spirit of enterprise had of late prompted Stoney Brothers to quit their old premises, and erect a magnificent pile of classical proportions in the most frequented part of the town, where greys and drays and waggoners should be permanently quartered, and which should become the colossal emporium, as it were, and fountainhead, of the very strongest beer (for the money) that could be brewed by the power of steam.

Old grey-headed tradesmen who remembered Middlesworth before the days of railroads, small-profits-and-quick-returns men—who ate and slept in their places of business, and were proud of it—who "kept the shop as the shop kept them" —looked with no favourable eyes on the new brewery, sagaciously opining that Stoney Brothers were reaching their hands out farther than they could draw them back again; but the younger division of the mercantile interest—the modern class of shopkeepers—approved much of the whole proceeding; and Mr. Dowlas, the draper, an eloquent person, with a taste for public speaking and Mechanics' Institutes, declared it was "refreshing to witness such a bold and comprehensive spirit of enterprise, which deserved, even if it failed, to command success!"

There was one person, however, who could not bring himself to entertain these sanguine views of the new undertaking, on whose peace of mind the huge erection seemed to press, with the specific weight of the very bricks and mortar of which it was composed. George Stoney had looked, if possible, graver and wearier than ever since the foundations of the building had been laid. It was only after long consideration that he had given his consent to its commencement, after carefully inspecting the plans, and reducing the estimates, and calculating the expense. When fairly begun, nobody could have shown more energy and activity in furthering its completion; but even Mrs. Stoney observed that George grew quieter—"more absorbed in thought," she called it—day by day; and Dot, standing on papa's knee, and taking stock, as usual, of his

eyebrows, whiskers, etc., was delighted to find how many more of those "nice white hairs" she could discover every time she looked for them.

To your own family your symptoms are never so alarming as to strangers. Meeting you every day, changes are to them imperceptible, which your visitors, as they drive away, tell each other "they were quite shocked to perceive." Illness is like age. You fondly imagine the man you shave to-day is very like what he was when you began to shave him thirty years ago; and the wife of your bosom, if always with you, never looks older than when she was a bride. Thus the gradual decline from indisposition to weakness, and from weakness to ill-health, is only observed by your doctor. And when the inmates of your household begin to see a difference in your appearance, depend upon it, the last change of all is not very far off.

At the dinner-table the conversation was principally between Philip and his sister-in-law. The latter moistening her remarks pretty plentifully with the beer of the firm, as indeed she had a good right, from conviction of its excellence, and conscious want of its sustaining power within. There was no ostentation about the repast, but all its accessories were close at hand without the trouble of asking for them. The linen was soft and white, the plates too hot to hold, the silver shone, the glass sparkled, and the dumb-waiter was scarcely quieter or more indispensable than the noiseless parlour-maid, who removed and changed the dishes with each succeeding course. That parlour-maid's ribbons always looked new. For the first month her mistress vowed daily "Jane wouldn't suit," on the score of being "dressy"; but Jane's clean hands and willing face, and tidy, active ways, soon gained for her the reputation of being a treasure. Dot, too, entertained morbid feelings about her merits. "Altogether," as Jane wrote to her sister, "the place was suitable, and she had no intentions of leaving of it."

Mrs. Stoney looked very ample and handsome, dispensing the good things before her to her husband and his brother. Neither of them, to use her own expression, "took as much animal food" as she thought good for them. Her own idea was, that the more a man ate and drank, the stronger he must necessarily become. She would have liked to feed her husband as often as she did the baby in possession. George Stoney, lifting his head languidly to decline any more of his own beer, was admonished, that if he would neither eat nor drink at dinner, he must promise to take two or three glasses of good

wine afterwards. "If once you let the system down," argued Mrs. Stoney, "every medical man will tell you he cannot answer for the consequences. Look at me; I'm sure I can't think whatever I should do without my beer. Philip there is afraid of his waist, I know, but you've no need to be apprehensive on that score, George. Your dancing days are over, my dear; something like my own."

Mrs. Stoney was fond of asserting her matronly exemption from the delights of the dance; claiming privilege on the score of superannuation, which it was pleasant to hear indignantly denied. This self-depreciation, too, was purely theoretical; inasmuch as she liked nothing better than to swim through a quadrille, with the majestic and imposing progress of a first-class ship under easy sail; and my own impression is, that she abstained from waltzing less from a sense of decorum than a specific gravity of person, which rendered that measure too laborious and breathless an effort for recreation, and only to be risked on great occasions, once or twice a year.

"I've other things than dancing to attend to," said her husband abstractedly; "and if I hadn't, Bell," he added, with a smile, "I don't think Middlesworth is much of a place for that amusement."

"I declare if he hasn't forgotten our ball!" exclaimed Mrs. George, clapping her hands with a peal of laughter, and turning to her brother-in-law. "Now, that's George all over. I'll undertake to say *you've* been thinking about it, Philip, more than enough, and are engaged, a dozen deep beforehand, with all the prettiest partners in the town. Ah, it's a great pleasure is a ball, to young people! though there's many a heartache comes from it afterwards; and a headache too," added she reflectively, "if Mr. Driblet furnishes the champagne, as usual, at supper."

"Both are easily got rid of," answered Philip; "and both are easily avoided, if a man knows what he's about. You needn't dance, if you can't take care of your heart; and you needn't drink champagne, if you're not sure of your stomach."

"If I was a man, I'd run my chance of both," replied Mrs. George Stoney. "Nothing venture, nothing have! Phil; and, faint heart never won fair lady. But you don't get off so easily from our Middlesworth balls. London parties may be better, and more crowded, if you come to that; but nobody shall persuade me they can be more genteel."

"I know nothing about London," said Philip, who seemed a little restless and inclined to change the subject. "I am not

much of a judge in such matters, but these seem well enough in their way."

"Well enough in their way!" echoed his sister-in-law. "Why, George, did you ever hear anything like that?"

"Anything like what?" asked her husband, waking up from a dreaming fit, and relapsing without waiting for an answer; while his wife, who was used to his abstraction, continued the conversation without him.

"I'm sure, Philip, I wonder what you'd have, if these balls are not good enough for you. I've seen a good deal of life in my time, as a girl, you know, Phil, before I married your brother. The very first people, both from the barracks and the dockyard, were always welcome in my father's house: but if you ask me, I declare I don't know when I've set eyes on so many elegantly dressed females, and gentlemen of really fashionable exterior, as attended our Middlesworth ball this time last year. And it's been the same ever since I've known the town. If it wasn't for what I call the stuck-up set, who always will get by themselves at the top end of the room, there'd be nothing equal to our balls—nothing!"

Mrs. Stoney flourished her large well-shaped hand and arm, with a gesture that seemed to defy contradiction.

"I've seen some very handsome people at that end too," observed Philip, with a little malice, and a slight accession of colour in his cheek. "Lady Julia kept her whole party there last year, and they say that she is reckoned quite a beauty, even in London."

"I've no patience with her!" exclaimed Mrs. Stoney; "nor her mother neither. I blame Lady Waywarden far more than the girl; though, if you ask me, I think Lady Julia is rather inclined to be a romp. Such airs and graces, indeed! If we're not good enough to be in the same room with them, why do they come, I should like to know? I'm sure nobody wants 'em!"

This last assertion was somewhat inconsequent, inasmuch as these offenders contributed, at least, one-third of the ball-goers; and if they had abstained from attending, because nobody wanted them, the assembly would have been shorn of a large and very ornamental portion of its attractions. The grievance, however, was of long standing. Mrs. Stoney said no more than the truth, when she declared it to be one of which she could not speak with patience; moreover, it became year by year more confirmed amongst its originators, and more offensive to the rest of society.

The Town Hall, wherein these solemnities were held,

though a lofty and lengthy room, was, unfortunately, but of scanty width. The musicians' gallery, equally distant from both ends, and fronting an enormous fireplace, from before which the shy men were knocked out of time in about five minutes, almost divided it into two different apartments; and in the one of these, farthest from the door, the county families had contracted a habit of congregating, huddled together like starlings in a nor-'wester, and offering considerable social difficulties to such adventurous youths as might desire to extricate their partners from the flock. It was in vain the townspeople, with Mrs. Stoney at their head, strove to form an opposition gathering of their own, and took possession of the other end, leaving a clear space in the midst, as though for some exhibition of posture-making or legerdemain. This only made matters worse. Few ladies, and still fewer gentlemen, ventured to cross the Debatable Land; and, instead of a festive gathering, these assemblies began to assume the aspect of an impending battle between opposing armies, with Amazons in the front rank.

Mrs. Stoney, indeed, had, on one occasion, reaped a signal and unexpected triumph. It was when Lord Waywarden, the most good-humoured and unaffected of men, who could hardly have been made to understand the difficulty, had it been explained to him, deliberately left his ranks, and selecting her from the opposition for a partner, led her triumphantly to the top of a quadrille at his own end of the room, where she had a marquis for a *vis-à-vis*—an arrangement she did by no means dislike.

Nevertheless, such victories are too often fatal as defeats. The English fine lady *can* be the best bred woman in the world. It does not follow that she always *is*. When she means to be rude, she draws the bow with less compunction, and points her shafts more accurately and more mercilessly from behind the shield of conventionality than any other archer in the battle. Ere Mrs. Stoney had swum through her quadrille, with no less, be sure, than her accustomed majesty, she wished in her heart she had never left the other end of the room. Women have a way of making each other uncomfortable, which the stupider sex can neither appreciate nor understand; and though Mrs. George carried her crest bravely through the figures, and did not lower an eyelash, under Lady Waywarden's cold, contemptuous stare, she was very glad to get back to her own party at the conclusion; and from that night hated the "stuck-up set" more than ever.

"Take away, Jane," said she to the parlour-maid, who had

re-entered with dessert ; and after whispering certain injunctions, of which the words "bed" and "Miss Dot" were alone audible, she turned to Philip, and resumed the subject that about this time of year was generally uppermost in her mind.

"There's beauty enough, and to spare, Phil," said she, smoothing her own glossy bands of hair on her temples; "and this winter there will be more than ever; though, to be sure, I don't think much of the new people at the Poplars ; and I don't see what there is in that Mrs. Dacre to make a fuss about. If she didn't get her dresses straight from Paris, she'd be positively plain, to my fancy. Don't you think so, Phil?"

Phil had not thought about it; scarcely knowing Mrs. Dacre, indeed, by sight; so he said "Yes," with a clear conscience, and Mrs. George pursued her criticisms, well satisfied.

"Lady Julia will be there, I suppose, as usual? She's a good figure of a girl, and a sweet dresser, Phil—there's no denying that; but she'll never have her father's elegant manners; and I'm certain she's freckled when you're close to her. I declare, if she would only seem a little more unbending, there are none of them to beat my favourite, that dark-eyed Miss Brooke. Don't you think Miss Brooke is a very handsome, aristocratic-looking girl?"

But Philip's answer, if he made one, was lost in the wine-glass at his lips, for the subject was here brought to an abrupt termination by the apparition of Dot, rosy and tumbled, closely pursued by the parlour-maid, and obviously glowing with excitement from some overt act of successful rebellion.

The young lady's costume, too, was of the simplest and easiest. It consisted of a long white cotton garment, clinging closely round her slender little figure, and making it look absurdly limp and pliant. Her feet were bare, and her curls scattered over her shoulders. It was evident, even without Jane's disapproving face, that she had been permanently put to bed, and had jumped up again.

"Holloa, Dot!" "Why, here's Dot!" sufficiently expressed her father's and uncle's astonishment, while mamma's "*Now*, Dot!" denoted more displeasure than surprise. Whisking round the table, and dodging out of Jane's grasp, like an eel, the child sprang to Uncle Phil's knee, and explained her appearance with perfect frankness, and an air of determined resistance to injustice.

"My camel! my camel!" urged Dot, intensely in earnest.

"I've said my prayers, and I've had my hair done, and I've been a good little girl; and I can't go to bed without my camel!"

Jane here felt called upon to explain. "Miss Dot was very partial to her camel" (a rare specimen out of her Noah's Ark, resembling, now the paint was worn off, no known creature upon earth), "and couldn't never be got to bed without it"—a position the rebel seemed resolved to maintain; clasping Uncle Phil firmly round the neck, and from that point of vantage eyeing her pursuer with a comical expression of triumph and defiance.

It was evidently a case where nothing but mamma's interference could prove of the slightest avail. Mrs. Stoney accordingly rose from the table, and quietly carried off the intruder in her arms, the latter glancing roguishly at Uncle Phil, over the maternal shoulder, and clenching her little fist on the regained treasure, which even in the moment of capture she had spied out, and picked off the hearth-rug, where she had been playing with it before dinner.

"After a storm comes a calm," observed George Stoney, pushing the decanter over to his brother, and relapsing into silence.

Soon he looked up. "Those are my reasons, Phil," said he, reverting to Dot and her companions in the nursery, "for being so cautious. I sometimes think I'm not cautious enough for a man who has a wife and family dependent on his life almost for bread."

Philip knew well what was in his elder brother's mind. The latter could not bring himself to the belief that they had acted prudently in building the new brewery.

"It's nearly finished," said Philip in a hearty, cheery voice, answering his brother's thoughts rather than his words. "Nearly finished, and as good as paid for, in my opinion. I showed you the calculations I made yesterday. Look how the business will increase; why, in six months it will have doubled itself. In five years the capital will be paid up, and there you are with the fore-horse well by the head, as our people say—a rich man for good and all."

"Five years is a long time," replied George, looking thoughtfully into his glass. "Life's uncertain. I'm not such a hard fellow as you, Phil; and a good deal older into the bargain. Suppose I don't last five years?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the other. "You'll last fifty! Besides," he added in a tone of deep feeling, "I shall not be quite penniless. My share is a pretty good

thing—at least, *I* think so, I can tell you. Then, if worst came to worst, d'ye think you're fonder of the children than I am? And Isabella has something, though it isn't much, of her own. Your life's insured, too. Don't croak, old boy! What are you thinking of?"

"That reminds me," observed George, more cheerfully, "we ought to insure the new place, now it's so nearly finished. I meant to speak to you about it to-day, before you went to Bridlemere."

"I've thought of that, too," answered Philip joyfully. "We'll do it next week. Save a quarter's interest; don't you see, George? Oh, trust me for looking after the main chance!"

"You're a better man of business than I am," replied the elder brother, "though I've had so much more experience. And you think the venture is sure to turn out successfully; don't you, Phil?"

"Not a doubt of it," answered the latter confidently. "No more wine, George, thank you. Yes, I will; I'll have one glass, to drink 'Good luck to the new brewery, and success to Stoney Brothers!'"

George put a little sherry into the bottom of his glass, and pledged the hopeful toast. Nevertheless, the confidence was only forced in him, which was spontaneous in his brother. Their characters were different, both by nature and from the force of circumstances. Philip not only possessed the buoyant hope and energy of a young man who had never yet known serious disappointment; but he had also a resolute, and somewhat enterprising spirit, prone to adventure, and not to be deterred by the rebuffs of fortune. A thorough woman, the goddess is to be won both by readiness and persistency. Philip could repair a failure, as well as take advantage of a chance. At present, too, he seemed even more than ever to be working with a will. He wanted no holidays now, except, it may be, for an occasional day's shooting at Bridlemere. Mrs. George began to suspect that this desire of money-making must originate in something besides a love of independence for its own sake.

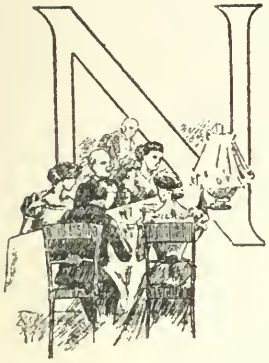
Her husband was not given to speculate on anything save future reverses in trade; nevertheless, he, too, observed that Philip was never tired of talking "shop." Business seemed now to be the subject uppermost in his mind at all seasons.

To the very threshold of their pretty drawing-room—in which Mrs. Stoney, having put Dot and her camel to bed, was waiting tea for them—he urged the advantage of taking

Jem Batters into their employment, at a somewhat lower rate of wages than the regular tariff; and even while the door opened she heard her husband's quiet melancholy tones reminding his brother of the insurance, and the latter's triumphant rejoinder, that he had saved a quarter's interest —"A whole quarter's interest, George, by not being in too great a hurry!"

CHAPTER V

TOLLESDALE



NEED I make excuses for reverting to the subject of dinner—that principal event in the recurring day? From the acorn-eating age of the savage to the great discovery of truffles; from the Red Indian who loosens his hunger-belt, and goes in for a gorge on juicy hump and oily marrow off the fresh-killed buffalo, to the dandy (no longer very young), starched, curled, and perfumed, who sits down to twenty dishes, with no appetite, but tastes of each in turn, stimulated by dry champagne; all times and all classes have agreed to regard dinner as an institution, to establish it as the axis round which the whole twenty-four hours revolve.

Nor must it necessarily be an extremely plenteous or elaborate repast. A crust of bread and cheese under a hedge; a sandwich (mustard forgotten) on the heather; a mutton chop, with another to follow—these simple provisions are competent, on occasion, and when nothing better can be had, to fill the place of a royal banquet, and afford as much satisfaction to the consumer as turtle and venison. There are but two conditions exacted for the sacrifice—the priest must be hungry and the offering clean. Then is there no necessity for great preparation or apparatus. Say grace, fall to, and if you cannot get a sip of sherry, or a glass of claret, or even a teaspoonful of alcohol, as a digestive, make the best of it and finish off with a smoke.

I know not why the very people for whom this important meal is an affair of the greatest ceremony, who take the most pains to have it good, and when they do get it, spend the most time in its discussion, should put it off as long as they possibly can.

The Stoneys were adjourning for tea at eight o'clock. It was a quarter past before the party at Tollesdale had fairly set down to dinner. Nor, indeed, was their complement made up even at that late hour. Jack Brooke's was a capital pony, no doubt; and Walter did not spare him as he galloped from the barracks. A good-looking young man, who wears his own hair and teeth, who does not require to curl his whiskers, and whose clothes are supplied (on credit) by the tailor most in vogue, ought to be able to dress for dinner in twenty-five minutes. Nevertheless, Walter contrived to make his entrance, and his bow to his hostess, as the soup disappeared, and sank into the seat reserved for him by Lady Waywarden, without thinking it necessary to excuse himself. Apologies in these days are never offered for anything; and a good deal of trouble is, perhaps, saved by their abolition. They would have been insincere, too, in the present instance, for Walter was late on purpose. He was a dandy, you see; and a certain affectation, properly toned down, was in keeping with the character. You must have attained your social position, whatever it may be, before you cease to care about it, and can afford to be natural. A man who wants to be thought wiser, or better, or richer than he is, can never quite dispense with sundry little artifices, sufficiently transparent to those who know how much is done in society for effect.

In Walter's case, however, it is only fair to say the effect was very good. Even Lady Waywarden admitted that he was "a gentleman-like, agreeable young man"; and her ladyship was by no means given to overrate the social qualities of her fellow-creatures. She had the happy knack, too, of letting them know that she made allowances, because so thoroughly satisfied of their inferiority; and this pleasant quality, combined with a stately figure and icy demeanour, rendered her a formidable personage even in London, and the terror of the whole country round Middlesworth.

She had been a beauty, in days when men admired a beauty, and women hated her more than they do now. The very mob cheered when she leant forward in the carriage at the bottom of St. James's Street, on her way to her first drawing-room. They talked about her in the clubs the day she was presented, and took odds about the double event of Sal Volatile winning the Oaks, and her marrying the only disengaged duke, before Goodwood. She had very regular features, a beautiful skin, and an expression of countenance denoting utter indifference to everything in the world. I don't believe she blushed when Lord Waywarden proposed

to her (he had recently succeeded to the earldom), and I think she said "Yes" with as little emotion as if he had offered her a cup of tea. People whispered there was a cousin in India that she used to like; but I consider this mere gossip. Indeed, unless he had been Governor-General, I am convinced a cousin in India would have stood but a poor chance.

At forty, Lady Waywarden had lost all pretensions to beauty. She looked the countess (though she was a commoner's daughter) and that was all. Like other fine ladies, she was active in mind, indolent in body. Though she spent the mornings in bed, and never walked a quarter of a mile from the hall door, she did a great deal of good amongst the poor, and did it, too, in the most judicious, energetic, and discriminating way; though she never pitied people, she was always ready to assist them; and much of her voluminous correspondence was occasioned by the public charities and benevolent associations, to which she was a generous and never-failing contributor. Waywarden was very fond of her, and let her do exactly as she pleased. He was right: coercion had never been tried with this lady, and it is likely that hers would have been a very difficult spirit to control.

The dinner-party consisted of five—perhaps I might say six, including Mr. Silke, the groom of the chambers; an important personage of refined appearance, whose duty seemed to consist in listening to everything that was said, and occasionally offering people sherry when they did not want it. There were a good many more servants, both in and out of livery, who waited as quietly as only very good servants can. His lordship was extremely particular, you see, and prided himself on the excellence of his domestic arrangements. There was only one house in England, he boasted, where "the thing" was as well done as at Tollesdale.

However disguised, Lord Waywarden could never have been taken for anything but a gentleman. Though he was short, broad-shouldered, and of a powerful build, there was something in the carriage of his handsome bald head; something in his bold, pleasant Saxon face; something in his frank, straightforward and collected manner, peculiar to the English nobleman. There is no class that combines so much of manliness with so much of refinement. Their bodies are vigorous, though their minds are cultivated; and the same individuals who are distinguished as scholars, statesmen, and diplomatists, have physical power to load coals or dig potatoes; and physical courage—pluck as it is now called—to do anything that can be attempted by man.

Nothing could be more different, however, than his lordship's outward appearance before and after half-past seven o'clock p.m. In the morning, from the top of his low-crowned white hat to the nails in his heavy double-soled shoes, he dressed the practical agriculturist to the life. He had been a sportsman in his day, and could handle a gun still as well as most men; but he was now devoted heart and soul to the farm. Hour after hour he would trudge about his acres, heedless of wind and weather, intent only on draining, top-dressing, or turnips; and rejoicing in the very savour of the dung-heaps that smoked at regular intervals over the brown and wealthy soil. He could cheapen bullocks, too, at fair or market, and not a drover on the road would have let him pick from his straggling charge, at the average price overhead of the herd. He could calculate the wool on a sheep, or the weight of a fat pig, at a glance; and his tenants affirmed that "my lord could buy e'er a one of 'em at one end of Middlesworth market, and sell him at the other!"

From his nine o'clock breakfast till he returned healthy, happy, and hungry at night, he was the farmer all over; but with the starched white neckcloth, and portly white waistcoat, came a transformation; and at his own table, no man could be more courtly, more polished, nor more agreeable than Lord Waywarden.

Walter was rather a favourite. My lord was so used to dandies he did not mind them; and had, besides, a natural liking for one whom he had known from childhood, and who was the son of his old friend and neighbour, poor bedridden Squire Brooke. Frank and genial in his nature, he would enjoy his bottle of claret over the fire when the ladies left them after dinner, none the less that his guest was more than five-and-twenty years his junior, and must necessarily consider him "an old fogey" in his heart.

It appears then that the guest was by no means in an enemy's country. Lord Waywarden liked him because he was used to him; Lady Waywarden liked him because he was not afraid of her; and here, I may observe, that Walter feared no woman on earth. This immunity he had obtained at considerable personal sacrifice, by his former intimacy with the well-known Mrs. Major Shabracque, late of the Dancing Hussars, a dashing lady, who rode, drove, dressed, rouged, gambled, flirted, and, I believe, smoked; adding to these dubious tastes the more reprehensible pursuit of breaking-in raw cornets to the ways of the world, almost as fast as they joined. People said she had rather burnt her fingers

with young Brooke, and took to liking *him*, when she only meant he should like *her*. But it seems improbable that a bold, brazen dame of five-and-thirty, with the animal spirits and great experience of Mrs. Shabracque, should ever have played a losing hazard, except as a matter of calculation in the game. Be this as it may, Walter got tired of dangling about her at last, and emerged from the ordeal a good deal hardened externally, and if scorched within, only so far burnt as is good for the child who must learn betimes to entertain a wholesome dread of fire. After exposure to such a battery all other artillery seemed but as a volley of small-arms. Moreover, without knowing it, Walter had become, so to speak, free of the guild. The women were civil to him wherever he went, and Lady Waywarden never dreamt of snubbing him as she snubbed his brother Jack.

With Mr. Silke, too, he was a prime favourite. Habits of personal extravagance, and a younger brother's liberality in *douceurs*, had completely won that functionary's affections; he really pressed him with the old sherry, and a certain white Burgundy, after cheese. Mr. Silke's own opinion was, that Captain Brooke, as he persisted in calling him, was "quite the gentleman."

Two more ladies made up the party. Miss Prince, who sat next to Walter, and although a little afraid of him, was delighted at her proximity to a live dandy. She, too, entertained certain prepossessions in his favour, though in an indirect way. Mr. Brooke's home was at Bridlemere; Bridlemere was near Middlesworth; in Middlesworth lived Mrs. George Stoney; and Mrs. George, when bouncing, handsome Isabella Richards, had been a pupil at a school — I beg pardon, an establishment — whereof Miss Prince was erst part-proprietress, and principal teacher in all the most important arts and sciences constituting female education. How the little woman could know so much, yet be so silly, was a marvel; nevertheless, in spite of a nervous twitter and foolish manner, and an insatiable tendency to ask questions, Miss Prince had a heart far too large in proportion for her body, and to the bottom of this great, simple, loving heart, Isabella Richards had found her way.

The former teacher had met with reverses, which she accepted in a humble, thankful spirit, that showed a good deal of Christian philosophy; and when the establishment broke up, the poor part-proprietress went out as governess to Lady Julia Treadwell, at whose emancipation she consented to remain as a sort of companion to her mamma. She had

a paralytic sister to provide for, of course. You never knew a woman totally unfitted to battle with the world, yet making a capital fight of it notwithstanding, who had not some drag of this description; but through all her ups and downs, debts and difficulties, Lady Julia's vagaries and Lady Waywarden's whims, she preserved, as fresh as ever, her great love for Isabella Richards, now Mrs. George Stoney. Though she marvelled much at his whiskers, his refinement, and the somnolency of his manners ("So unnatural in a young man, my dear," as she afterwards told Lady Julia), she could not but regard with considerable admiration so elaborate a specimen of his class as Walter Brooke. I think, next to personal courage, with which it is often associated, nothing goes down with women so well as personal vanity. The coxcomb runs the hero a very hard race, and a combination of both never fails to produce a winner.

Miss Prince, sitting on the edge of her chair, appealing constantly to her former pupil, and faltering a little when she caught Lady Waywarden's eye, laid siege to her neighbour in her own way, by plying him with a series of questions, chiefly, as being of engrossing interest to a soldier, on topics of military detail.

"And are all your men taught to ride by the same master, Captain Brooke?" asked Miss Prince, in a small, shrill, innocent voice. "And don't the music, and banners, and shooting off the guns, frighten the horses? And when you go to the field of battle, is the colonel obliged to go first? I'm so interested in the army. I had an uncle once in the War Office. And why are your soldiers called light dragoons?"

Walter stared, and held his glass for dry champagne. These questions were indeed posers, and while the thought flitted through his brain, "What the deuce makes the woman want to put *me* through my facings? Mad, of course"—he simply sipped his wine, and looked at Lady Julia, sitting opposite, who immediately took upon herself to reply.

"Because they've light heads, and light hearts, and light heels. Don't you know, Miss Prince, 'They love and they ride away'? It's part of the system. The army couldn't go on without it."

"My dear Julia!" exclaimed her mother.

Miss Prince looked shocked; Lord Waywarden laughed; Lady Julia's eyes sparkled, and shot a shaft or two at Walter that it could not have been unpleasant to sustain.

"We are not to ride away, at least, for some time, I am

glad to hear," said he, in a tone meant for his *vis-à-vis*, though he looked at Lady Waywarden. "Middlesworth is a charming quarter for me, in every respect, and they'll leave us here in peace now till the spring."

"I suppose hunting is the great attraction," said Lady Julia demurely, loosing the while another shaft from her bow.

"*And* the shooting at Tollesdale," added Walter, turning to his host, "*and* its inmates, *and* my own relations at Bridlemere. I'm a domestic person; I always was. Don't you know, I'm a domestic person, Lady Waywarden?" he reiterated, appealing to the countess.

"I confess, I shouldn't have guessed it if you hadn't told me," answered her ladyship drily; whereon the eyes of Walter and Lady Julia met once more, and they both laughed.

It seemed as if there was some understanding between these young people; some interest in common; some link subtler and stronger than the mere acquaintance of London partnership or country neighbourhood; but it was hard to say. I need scarcely observe, that Walter was not demonstrative; and as for Lady Julia, I am sorry to admit that she was such a rattle, and such a flirt, you never knew what she was driving at.

Animal spirits have a great deal to answer for. The daughter inherited all her father's health and vitality, with much of his joyous temperament, and had besides continually before her eyes her mother's example to warn her from the opposite extreme of exaggerated coldness and reserve. Lady Julia's exterior, too, was in marked contrast to her disposition. Such beauty as she possessed was of the cold, clear, delicate order. Her features were very straight and regular; but the eyes, though bright as diamonds, were set too deep in her head; and though her mouth was very winning when she spoke, the lips closed tight over the white, even teeth when she ceased, giving her whole countenance a cast of resolution — I had almost said defiance — more formidable than feminine. I have seen heads cut on cameos that resembled this young lady in every particular, and I think I have felt thankful that the type has become rarer now than it seems to have been of old. With her pale, clear skin (it was not freckled, though Mrs. Stoney said so, and though that sort of complexion generally is freckled), with her long, light eyelashes, her small, well-shaped head, and wealth of plaited hair, golden in the sun, rich chestnut by candlelight,

and called red or auburn, according as people were or were not in love with her, she certainly did possess a strange, weird, uncomfortable fascination of her own. There are some women with whom you fall in love, just as you fall asleep, easily, gradually, insensibly. The whole process is quite a pleasure, and the waking, as after a good night's rest, merely a question of time. There are others, again, who inflict on you nightmare rather than repose: whose image affords evil dreams instead of healthy slumbers, and under whose influence your state is more that of a mesmeric trance than of sound, natural rest. You are never really happy during the whole time of the delusion; when you wake you are very miserable indeed. These last are to be avoided if a man wishes to remain a free agent, and, in my opinion, Lady Julia was one of them. She had a beautiful figure, though slight; nobody could deny that. She was formed more like a model than a living creature; and this advantage, of which she was perfectly aware, perhaps made her the graceful mover, dancer, and horsewoman she was. I am afraid she loved riding dearly; she could do it very well, you see, and was rather proud of being called horsey and slangy by old women of either sex. To see her cross the pavement before their house in Circus Square, and kiss her favourite's nose, when she mounted or dismounted at the hottest hours of the day, was a sight, that if it suggested waste of affection, proved at the same time intense love for the animal and the exercise.

Even in the school-room Miss Prince was always afraid Lady Julia would be fast. "Not as feminine in her tastes as I could wish," was the way the governess worded her apprehensions, and they were justified by the result. She was fast, no doubt. Like her mother, she could be horribly fine when she chose, though it is only fair to say she seldom did choose in the country, or even in London, except on special occasions, and, so to speak, in self-defence. When they tilt in the mêlée, it is not to be expected that they should dispense with their plate-armour. She liked gaiety very much: balls, races, picnics, occasions for wearing handsome dresses, and flirting with handsome men. Nor is this an unusual tendency among the best and wisest of her sex, but I believe she was never really so happy as when riding a new horse, driving her wicked ponies, helping papa to break a retriever, or engaged in any other essentially masculine pursuit. It is a fact, that when her brother Viscount Nethersole, low down in the fourth form at Eton, was at home for

the holidays, she used to play cricket with him on the lawn, and could bowl, bat, and keep a wicket, so that young nobleman affirmed, "as well as any fellow in the Lower Shooting-fields eleven."

Whether Walter had the slightest chance in an encounter with such a disposition, was a question he had asked himself more than once of late. Perhaps he had not answered it satisfactorily even now, while he sat opposite the brilliant, animated girl, and thought what an amusing companion she could be, and what a well-bred one she was. You are not to suppose he was in love with her—that sort of thing is quite exploded now. Since the introduction of knickerbockers, I doubt if a man has ever been known to go down on his knees, and Lady Julia was the last person in the world to encourage, or even tolerate, anything in the shape of romance. But he certainly admired her. It was with a feeling of positive vexation that he bethought him, how, before he went away the day after to-morrow (he had to attend a dismounted parade at two o'clock), he would breakfast by himself, without a chance of her company, which she might so easily afford him if she chose. He knew the ways of the house, and could recall one or two disappointments of the same nature. Lord Waywarden breakfasted in his writing-room, and a capital meal he made, at nine. Miss Prince consumed tea and toast in a spacious apartment, once a schoolroom, at half-past; Lady Julia had her chocolate in bed at eleven; and Lady Waywarden never showed till two or three o'clock in the afternoon. Breakfast went on for the guests from ten indefinitely; and nothing could be easier than for Lady Julia to come down and make Walter's tea, but well he knew she would do nothing of the kind.

She was a clever girl, and had enjoyed a good deal of practice in that sort of intercourse with young gentlemen, which, though of a warmer nature than friendship, stops short of positive flirtation. They never went further than she liked with her, or said to her more than she meant they should; and this immunity she owed partly to frankness of manner, natural or artificial; partly to fearless tactics and skill in defensive warfare. She had a reputation, too, for spirit, as well as wit, and men did not care to provoke an encounter with a lady who was notorious for the facility with which she could show you up or set you down. Of her own sex she had plenty of companions, but no friends; of the other, plenty of admirers, but no lovers. There are many of these exotic flowers grown in our aristocratic hothouses—flowers that are

forced rather early into bloom, but are otherwise carefully reared and tended ; of stately growth, and wondrous splendour, protected from the bee rather than the butterfly, and too often thrown away on an amateur, who has but to walk into the glasshouse, and select from it that which he desires. I sometimes think they are the better for transplanting, flourishing as brightly on a poorer soil and in a more exposed situation, losing nothing of their beauty, and gaining a perfume sweeter than before. Lady Julia used to say she should make a capital poor man's wife, whereat mamma lifted her white hands in horror, and Miss Prince her grizzled eyebrows in deprecation. Such jests were not encouraged in the family. Being an only daughter, she would have some money, and by a perversion of reasoning, less logical than natural, it seems established that such young ladies are to fetch a higher price in the matrimonial market than others of the same fabric, equal in colouring and workmanship, but without the gilding. Lady Waywarden, however, obviously entertained no suspicions of Walter Brooke. Whether it was that the latter seemed, as befitted his profession, cuirass all over, and a warm admirer of no style of beauty but his own, or whether she was herself so utterly impenetrable (for the Indian cousin, if he ever existed, had been forgotten long ago) as to disbelieve in the superstition of mutual attraction, or whether her ladyship's confidence arose from familiarity with her daughter's disposition, she certainly seemed to permit, if not to encourage, a state of things which any of her own sex would have termed a strong flirtation with Walter Brooke.

Lady Julia, for her part, was nothing loath to keep her hand in, and seemed to practise on the present subject with even more than her usual zest. In vain mamma fitted on a taper white glove, to indicate sailing orders for the drawing-room. In vain Miss Prince made nervous little coughs, and took short dives at her smelling-bottle, and fidgeted uneasily to the extreme edge of her seat—the tide of Lady Julia's eloquence compelled them more than once to lower away their signals in despair.

Even Walter seemed to glow and brighten under the sunshiny glances of the syren. She asked him questions that denoted so much personal interest ; she plied him so volubly with half good-humoured, half sarcastic remarks of a nature that she would herself have called chaff ; so sparkled, as it were, and flashed at him, like a gem in a golden setting, that he could not but be pleased, though somewhat dazzled the while, at least for him, and not a little surprised.

"What sport had he yesterday? How late they must have left off! How many guns? and who were they? Plenty of ground game at Bridlemere (what a pretty name!), but not so many pheasants as papa, dear, *you* can show Mr. Brooke to-morrow. Oh! *she* knew! And was Mr. de Rolle there? What a shame to call him Rags! Had seen him—was sure of it—the other day out with the duke's hounds—must have been Rags—rather admired him; his figure especially. And how did you get here, Mr. Brooke, and why were you so late?"

"I got here on Jack's pony," answered the hussar; "and I suppose I was late, because I started early, and galloped the whole way."

"If I had said so, you would have called it a woman's reason," observed Lady Julia, still ignoring mamma's signals, who had now finished buttoning on a very close-fitting and symmetrical glove. "But I rather pity the poor pony. Is it a very good animal? I think one of mine is the best in the world, and the other is better still. I am so fond of ponies! Tell me all about your brother's."

"My dear Julia," interrupted Lady Waywarden, whose patience was fairly exhausted, "Mr. Brooke will tell you all about the pony in the drawing-room."

And her ladyship, gathering up fan, handkerchief, and smelling-bottle, rose as a cloud of drapery, and sailed stately, rippling and rustling as she went, to the door. Walter held it open, with a flourish, watching, it may be, for a responsive glance from Lady Julia as she went by, which, it is needless to observe, she did not vouchsafe to bestow. My lord sank into an arm-chair by the fire, poured out a liberal glass of claret, pushed the decanter to Walter, gulped, smacked his lips, spread a strong white hand to warm, and commenced a promising conversation by prophesying an open winter; and asking his guest whether he had seen any sport yet, and had got together some horses he liked?

With such a preface, the dialogue was pretty sure to proceed swimmingly. Every man is pleased to talk about his horses, whatever be the number or nature of his stud; and Lord Waywarden was a good listener on any topic, by the side of a blazing fire, and with such excellent claret as his own to keep the subject from getting dry. "He had been young himself," he was fond of observing; and he might have added that for enjoyment of to-day and thoughtlessness of to-morrow, he had been very young indeed. Whilst he had nothing, his lordship had been one of the fastest of the fast.

He bought, no doubt, a good deal of experience in dealing with the Jews, as Lord Nethersole, bought it of course at a high percentage on cost price. The earl, however, had the good sense to use the wisdom the viscount purchased, and it must have been a very sharp Jew indeed who could get to windward of Waywarden now; yet it never seemed to occur to him that his old friend's second son ought hardly to give three figures for his horses, and have so many in the stable. Not that he would have wittingly encouraged him in any hurtful extravagance, but that it was one of those matters men in his position seem to ignore; none more so than those who have known difficulties in their youth, and got out of them either by good fortune or good abilities. Perhaps they think others must be able to do the same, and, recognising only the successful ventures, forget the number of barques that have been met in stress of weather on the voyage, and never come into port at all. Be this how it may, it seems that a young man need only show an inclination to go a fair pace down the road, and all his friends are eager to encourage and assist him on the way. By the time Walter had finished his bottle of claret, and corrected everything with half a glass of old sherry, the world seemed a good one to live in, and an easy one to get on with. As he flung his napkin into his chair, and swaggered off to the drawing-room, pulling his moustache, he had no difficulty in stopping certain misgivings as to ways and means which had oppressed him not a little, on an empty stomach, during the process of dressing for dinner.

The invention of the pianoforte must have done incalculable service in the way of reducing the nobler sex to subjection. For a woman who does not sing, I can conceive no auxiliary so versatile, and at the same time so effective. She can work on your feelings with the treble; she can drown your remonstrance with the bass; she can conceal the very words you see trembling on her lips with a grand crash of both hands at once, dying away presently into a wail of low melodious chords, that draw your very heart out through your long, foolish, thrilling ears. Then her attitude at the instrument is in itself so graceful, the turn of her hands and arms over the keys so attractive, and the upward look she steals at her prey so irresistible, that the charm is completed, long before the *fantasia* is finished. The listener gasps, and yields without an effort at self-preservation. The net is spread, the noose adjusted, resistance is hopeless, and escape impossible.

It must have been pleasant to lean over Lady Julia, to listen to her playing, which was good; and watch her profile, which was better; and catch, ever and anon, the sparkle of those diamond eyes, which was best of all. Coffee came and went. Curaçoa and tea were offered, and declined. Lady Waywarden wrote sheet after sheet to some other corresponding countess, for whom she cared as little as possible in her heart. Miss Prince worked a counterpane of formidable dimensions, with a hook-nosed ivory instrument, in short angry notches, and watched the while for Lord Waywarden's teacup, balanced insecurely on that nobleman's knee, who had sunk, as usual, into a sound, healthy, and somewhat noisy slumber. Walter was treated without ceremony (not that the earl could keep awake after dinner for any guest in the world; so that when the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, who was a prodigious favourite, stayed at Tollesdale, he used to take his repose in jerks and snatches, standing with his back to the fire); but Lady Julia alone seemed to devote herself to the young man's amusement, and very successful, it is but fair to say, she was.

By the time he had drawn a low easy-chair to the pianoforte, and seated himself in close proximity to her music-stool, their conversation had gradually sobered down from the bantering to the confidential. Though she played at intervals (remarkably well), and kept up, indeed, a semblance of music throughout, they talked upon a variety of subjects, interesting and indifferent, but all leading to one termination, namely, the state of things at Bridlemere, the farm, the shooting, the squire's health, Helen's pursuits, "your charming sister, Helen, Mr. Brooke"; even brother Jack, his pony and terrier, were discussed in turn, and it was hard to say on which Lady Julia seemed to dwell with the most pleasure. By the time Lady Waywarden finished her letter, Miss Prince saved the teacup, and my lord awoke himself with a vigorous snore, Walter began to think that he had at last succeeded in making some real progress with the daughter of the house. It was now long past midnight, and they used to fancy that they were rather early people than otherwise at Tollesdale. Poor Miss Prince could scarcely keep awake, and swallowed a yawn in the very act of wishing everybody good-night; but Lady Julia's eyes sparkled brighter than ever, while Walter lit her candle; and even in the hall, when he turned to watch her up the wide staircase, branching off midway in the direction of her own and her mother's apartments, she flashed back at him one more of those deadly

arrows that, like the Parthian's, are so fatal when thus delivered over the shoulder. More, he heard her voice die away along the corridor above, humming the air she had been playing, which he had most enthusiastically admired.

Walter returned to his host, and drank a glass of fair water, receiving at the same time directions as to where he should find a certain smoking-room, recently built, and fitted up expressly for the enjoyment of that deleterious luxury. But his host excused himself from joining him. "He was confoundedly sleepy," he said, "so should be off at once without ceremony to perch." And Walter, reflecting that it was getting late, and he would like to shoot his straightest to-morrow, followed my lord's example, and was soon well over the border, and far into the Land of Shadows, where mankind pass nearly a third of their lives.

CHAPTER VI

JACK BROOKE

IT was a lovely night, for all that the month was November, in the park at Bridlemere. A light haze hung over the saturated earth, and through its film the moonlight glimmered in ghostly whitened rays. The stems of the old trees loomed huge, fantastic, and ill-defined, like objects in a dream. Where the ground rose but by a few feet, patches of bare russet sward, and brown bending fern, and here a clump of brushwood, and there a twisted, stunted thorn, emerged like islands from the surface of a milky sea; but on a lower level, more especially down towards the lodges, and in a part of the park called Dingle-side, the heavy vapours rolled and curdled, wreathing themselves into strange curves and shapes that, waving in and out between the trees, a vivid fancy might well conjure into phantoms of the night.

A heavy dew had fallen, moistening and thickening the clinging herbage, so as to deaden the footsteps of the only passer-by at this late and lonely hour; footsteps, I am sorry to say, that left an exceedingly wavering and devious track behind them, denoting want of harmony between the volition and execution of the belated traveller.

It was but our friend Jem Batters, finding his way home from the public-houses of Middlesworth, to his mother's cottage across Bridlemere Park. Jem Batters walking himself sober, though by no means yet arrived at that desirable condition, and hovering between the imaginative state produced by combining beer with alcohol, and the nervous prostration consequent on such a mixture when its fumes have evaporated. After to-night, Jem had resolved he would turn over a new leaf. He had been "wetting his luck," as he called it, for the last time. To-morrow he was promised employment in the brewery, and henceforth he would become sober and steady, and save his money as well as his nerve and muscle; for Jem had found, to his dismay, that these two last were beginning somewhat to fail from the effects of

dissipation. Thus it always was with this unfortunate rustic. Every new phase of life was inaugurated with a debauch that riveted his fetters faster on him than before. Well might his old mother declare, "It was the drink as done it. Wuss than pison! Keep our Jem from the drink, an' there ar'n't his equal, not in the parish, there ar'n't — either for work *or* play!"

"Our Jem" lurched up against one of the old elms, and, setting his back to it, gazed down a vista towards the Manor House with drunken gravity, shaking his head as he espied a light twinkling from an upper window in the vague grey mass. Jem's thoughts were running riot apace, and he was speculating wildly on the inmates of that mansion, their pursuits, their habits, and their position, which he had been brought up to regard with a veneration such as we pay to royalty—his fancies following each other something in this fashion—

How pleasant to be a gentleman! Not a gentleman in trade, like his future employers, Stoney Brothers; nor a soldier gentleman, forced to do as he is bid, getting wages just like a working man, and expected to fight into the bargain; but a real gentleman, like our old squire, with nothing to do and plenty to drink, and time upon his hands the whole day long. Then he remembered that our old squire had not been seen at farm or garden; had not been outside the house now for a weary while; that the labourers whispered to each other how his time was nearly come; that one-half of him was as good as dead already; and Jem felt an instinctive shudder creep from head to heel while he shrank from the conviction that not only the old squire, but he himself, and "mother," in the chimney-corner at home, and the boon-companions whom he left still carousing at the Fox and Fiddle, were subject to the common lot. He would drive away such thoughts though, with beer and brandy, he reflected, if he were a gentleman. If he were Mr. John, for instance. Ah! that was the man he would like to change places with! Mr. John, so frank, so bold, so stout and hearty, such a pleasant-spoken gentleman, too, with every girl in the parish talking of his ruddy cheek, his brown locks, his white teeth, and his ready smile. Jem pictured to himself Mr. John at this moment, sitting at the head of his father's table, surrounded by his guests, the land-steward, the tax-gatherer, the new tenant at the Mere Farm, and perhaps one or two of the parish churchwardens, waited on by grooms, gamekeepers, the under-gardener, and all the servants in the

house; drinking port wine out of tumblers, and singing hunting songs alternately with Miss Helen's music, who is playing the piano to the party, with a gold necklace on, and flowers in her hair. Ah! it must be a jolly life, that must! He didn't think much of Miss Helen, though. She wasn't plump and likely looking, what he called; though some folks made a great to-do about her slim waist and her cream-coloured face, with its black eyes. To his mind, now, Cissy Brown or Sue Stanion were either of 'em a better sort; more what he should call his choice, you know.

But dear! if he was a gentleman, he wouldn't trouble much about the women-folk! Not in his present mood at least. Give him a good horse, and rabbiting every day, as much as he liked, and plenty to drink when he came in, and he wouldn't ask for more. He'd be as happy as a king, he would! Keep the game up too, as well as e'er a gentleman of them all. Ah! that *would* be prime!

"You wheezy old beggar, you frightened me, you did!"

Jem gave a violent start that denoted a good deal more nervousness than is usual with the healthy system of an out-of-door labourer, and that probably frightened the asthmatic sheep whose cough thus broke in on the thread of his reflections, quite as much as that gasping animal, lying in the driest part of the gravelled carriage-road, had frightened him. Under its sobering influence, however, he woke from the dream in which he had been immersed, and made his way more steadily over the park in the direction of his home. Thither it is not my present intention to follow him. I would rather climb up one of those long flickering rays to that window high in the lofty building, and enter the chamber of the only inmate still awake, an hour and more after midnight, in the house of Bridlemere.

An odour of strong tobacco fills the apartment, wreathing itself about the walls and furniture as gracefully, and in far heavier volumes, than does the mist about the trees and shrubs outside. Clearing sluggishly at intervals, it discloses a short, very short pipe, such an instrument as French soldiers appropriately call a *brûle-gueule*, blackened with unremitting use, and held firmly between two rows of remarkably strong, white, and even teeth. Jack Brooke's mouth is like his brother Walter's, only, being clean shaven, the family lines of resolution around its lips are more apparent on the face of the elder son. This face is brown, ruddy, and healthful, not regular of features, and far inferior in beauty to that of the handsome hussar, but with an honest, hearty expression, and a kindli-

ness in the eyes sufficiently engaging. Perhaps it is only their long lashes that impart to these a depth and softness almost womanly. Certainly, there is benevolence, goodwill, and a gentle, protective tenderness in their glance.

It is a face that most people would call comely, but heavy. Those who look below the surface, and are accustomed to study character from slight indications, would detect a sensitive nature under this rough exterior, would observe signs of warm affections, a high standard of good, and a generous confidence in others, mingled with the diffidence and self-depreciation which spring from an imaginative temperament, suppressed and restrained by force of circumstances, combined with a keen sense of the ridiculous.

The fancy that is easily moved to laughter is also somewhat susceptible of tears. A man of common sense, ashamed to own his tendency to such weak emotions, cloaks them under brevity of speech, rough carelessness of manner, and an appearance of confirmed insensibility, transparent enough to those who are in the habit of penetrating the affectations of their kind. It is your glib, plausible, well-spoken personage, generally voluble, always indifferent, and habitually polite, whose heart is as hard as the nether millstone. Abruptness of speech, hesitation in offering and accepting conventional courtesies, reserve with strangers, and diffidence amongst women, these drawbacks to social success are often the very offspring of generous feelings and a high tone of mind. It is a calumny to say that shyness arises from conceit. It is more generally the result of respect for others as well as self; and, though the example be rare as it is ridiculous, a man who is capable of blushing after his whiskers are grown, is usually a good fellow at bottom, and as honest as the day is long.

Jack Brooke was sadly given to this absurdity. Many a lady accosting Mr. Brooke across the dinner-table, had marvelled to note how her simple remark brought the blood to his cheek; marvelled, perhaps, still more to find no further result from his confusion. He was frightened at ladies, and that is the truth. "What he thought they would do to him," as Walter used to say, "was a mystery." But though Jack was as bold a fellow as ever stepped, under circumstances of physical danger, he was routed, so to speak, and put to flight with great slaughter, by the society of a miss in her teens.

His character was not very easy to penetrate. I doubt if anyone knew him thoroughly. Certainly not his father, nor his brother Walter, nor even Helen, though on occasion she was the only person in whom he would confide. "Tatters," a

certain ragged terrier of eccentric habits, inseparable from his master, seemed more familiar with his thoughts and opinions than any other inmate of the house. It speaks well for Jack that the dog loved him with a devotion utterly ludicrous and canine. The domestics in general liked the younger brother best. Walter gave them far more trouble, domineered, hectored, blew up, always in his own off-hand princely way, and they came to heel, as it were, and fawned upon him, as human nature will, when consistently and judiciously bullied. He was free, too, with his money, and enjoyed, besides, the *prestige* of his profession, his moustaches, and occasional appearance in undress uniform, a costume which the female part of the establishment—from the old housekeeper, already a middle-aged person when he was weaned, down to the under kitchen-maid, lately promoted from the Sunday school to the scullery—declared, one and all, "became Master Walter wonderful!"

Jack's pursuits may be gathered from the furniture and accessories of this, his own peculiar snuggery, far removed from the inhabited regions of the mansion, where he spends many a solitary hour undisturbed, and where he can smoke his strong tobacco in peace, without polluting the atmosphere for every other member of the establishment.

His literary tastes seem simple enough, and of a practical rather than a speculative nature. A heavy work on agriculture, with elaborate diagrams of ploughs, turnip-cutters, and such mechanical auxiliaries to husbandry, stands in the place of honour on the row of shelves which constitute his library. It is supported by a few odd numbers of the *Sporting Magazine*, a periodical in which he takes great delight; by two or three fly-books, stuffed with crafty entomological imitations, tied by Jack's own strong, supple fingers; and a thick quarto edition of Spenser's *Faëry Queen*, a work into which, as into a stiff, fertile soil, you may dig, and dig again, reaping in proportion to your labour crop after crop in swift succession, of free, golden, and abundant harvests.

In decoration, the chamber has but little to boast. Originally a servant's room, very near the roof; its walls are simply whitewashed; its one window is bare of blind or curtain. There is a carpet trodden into shreds by Jack's nailed shooting-boots, and there is a high-backed leathern chair, in the depths of which Tatters lies curled up and motionless, but opening an eye occasionally to make sure his master is still poring over a red-covered interlined account-book at the

writing-table. Propped against the inkstand is a photograph from a picture in one of the drawing-rooms, and when Jack's eye travels from his work, it rests sadly and rather longingly on the photograph. At such moments Tatters bestows an affectionate wink on his master.

The photograph represents a handsome, prosperous-looking woman with Helen Brooke's cast of features, and a countenance which, although very different in character, has a strong physical resemblance to the girl's—a face that, with energy to sustain its burdens, and good-humour to lighten its crosses, seems designed thoroughly to enjoy the pleasures as well as to fulfil the duties of life, not to be cut off after eight-and-forty hours of illness before it had reached its prime. Jack remembers her well. To this day, when he thinks of his mother, his heart tightens with the old pain that was so unbearable at first. For years the child, and afterwards the schoolboy, would wake up and weep in silence, longing, yearning for the dear lost face, to his mind the fondest and fairest he had ever seen.

Being the eldest, Jack remembered her far better than the rest. She died, indeed, when Helen was yet little more than an infant; but her firstborn was her constant playmate and companion, the pride of her young wifehood, and the darling of her maternal heart. "Mother," says a great writer, who has lately gone from among us, "is the name for God with little children"; and there is, indeed, no earthly worship at once so pure, so trusting, and so engrossing, as that which is offered to her by the innocent loving heart to which she is the embodiment of beauty, affection, and power. When Mrs. Brooke died, the squire, as the servants said, "took on dreadful"; but he got over her loss long before his quiet, undemonstrative little son. Ruth, the upper housemaid, since married, somewhat hurriedly, to a blacksmith, and gone to Australia, found the child, months afterwards, squeezing his poor little face against the railings of the churchyard where his mamma was buried, crying, as that soft-hearted damsel described it, "poor dear, softlike and patient; and indeed if my 'art 'ad been a stone it must have guv to the darling then and there!" So she carried Master John back again every yard of the way, an honest mile and more, in her bosom, mingling her tears with his, from pure sympathy and compassion, foregoing altogether the junketing to which she was bound with her blacksmith, and thereby deferring, if not imperilling, the whole scheme of her nuptials and subsequent emigration. Jack was right to mourn for his mother. He

had been somewhat lonely in the world ever since she left him. Whether the child's nature became repressed and blighted, as it were, by so deep an affliction endured so early, or that, lavishing so much love on mamma, it had the less to spare for anyone else; certain it is that the eldest boy stood a little aloof from brother and sister, nay, even from his father himself, and appeared, unlike other children, to lead his own life apart, and follow out his own train of thoughts and fancies uninfluenced by the companionship of those with whom he lived.

He was no recluse though, far from it. At school, where he took a leading part in football and cricket matches; at college, where he remained long enough to be plucked for that preliminary examination which is called the Little Go, and whence he departed sorrowful and humiliated rather than surprised, Jack Brooke was unquestionably a favourite. Returning to Bridlemere, he mingled cordially in the sports and gatherings of the county; but at the latter he could scarce be said to enjoy himself; whilst of the former he seemed most to relish those which are best pursued alone. There was not such a fly-fisher as Jack in the Midland Counties. To circumvent ducks by moonlight, flushing the wary wild-fowl just within range, and securing the effect of both barrels, was a talent he possessed in common with a select few of his fellow-creatures, and the exercise of which afforded him an intense and inexplicable delight; but to walk up partridges in line, or to stand at covert ends and knock down cock-pheasants by the dozen, offered him neither pleasure nor excitement. In the sport *par excellence*, the spirit stirring, the joyous, the unrivalled, the very thought of which recalls a golden vision of those mild November mornings, with their dewy pastures, their fragrant copses, and their deep, still woodlands, faintly blushing yet from autumn's farewell kiss; of manly cheer, and kindly greeting, and white and scarlet, and tramp of hoof, and ring of bridle; of the horse's generous daring, and the dash and mettle of the hound; of the heart-beating moments ere suspense thrills into certainty; of the maddening rally for a start, and the quieter, steadier, more continuous energy of the chase—in *the* sport of sports, I say, no man was a deeper proficient than Jack Brooke. Yet he enjoyed it very rarely now for reasons which will appear hereafter. He could ride, too, better than the generality of sportsmen. Strongly built, and of considerable weight, he cherished, nevertheless, a taste for keeping in the front rank, which was neither to be baulked by magnitude of obstacle nor inferiority

of horse-flesh. The youngest and wildest reprobate was easy and tractable in his hands: sitting quite still and unflurried, he seemed to impart his own cool energy to his horse. The animal soon enters into the joke, and enjoys it as much as his rider. I do not aim at giving Jack more credit than he deserves for success in a mere pastime. I only wish you to infer that he had both courage and temper, a combination of qualities which help a man over the metaphorical ups and downs of life as across a flying country, with a pack of foxhounds running hard.

In general society our friend was, perhaps, not quite so forward. In the ballroom, I fear, he sat motionless as in the saddle; and at picnics, or archery meetings, proved simply a dead weight and encumbrance. He was not even a good listener, and when tackled by an old, or even a young lady, without means of escape, afforded a piteous and distressing spectacle. Elderly gentlemen had a high opinion of him notwithstanding. They considered him "A sensible young man that: none of your talking chaps, sir; but a fellow that's not above taking a hint. No conceit, sir: not ashamed to be taught." And indeed he would suffer the platitude of his seniors meekly, and with a patience the less meritorious, perhaps, that he permitted his attention to wander sadly during its progress, and went his way totally uninfluenced by the lecture at its close.

The women, I fear, compared him unfavourably with his younger brother. Of Walter's dandyism, *insouciance*, and charming conceit, he had not one iota. These qualities, like ribbons, laces, and such garnishing, command high prices in the female market. The stouter calico and flannel virtues, so to speak, fetch but a few coppers per yard. A handsome face and a pair of broad shoulders cannot hold their own against varnish and vanity combined; nor are the only merits which constitute a good husband and *père de famille* of the kind much relished in a dancing partner. Here and there a very fine lady who was a little tired of everybody, or a very fast one who wanted to strike out a new line, might think it worth while to cultivate Jack Brooke; but each invariably gave him up in despair after half a dozen sentences. No woman, however fast or fine, likes to be assured by a man's manner that he is hopelessly uninterested in herself, her bonnet, her conversation, and her opinions. The slightest spark of intelligence, the shortest monosyllable thrown in at intervals, will keep her tongue going, with small exertion on a listener's part; but the intelligence and the interest must at least be

simulated, otherwise she votes you, "Oh! so heavy!" and flutters off to fasten on other game, with which she hopes to have better sport.

I fear most of the young ladies about Middlesworth would have passed upon Jack Brooke the sweeping condemnation that he was "absent and stupid, and always seemed to be thinking of something else!" He had a good deal to think of. He was busied with no pleasant thoughts now, poring over those ruled pages, and emitting tobacco smoke in pungent clouds that caused old Tatters to sneeze disgusted from the depths of his arm-chair. Jack was fond of farming. Jack was a practical farmer. Jack could not bear to see things going wrong, and business mismanaged, and money wasted where money was becoming scarcer every day. His taste for agriculture he inherited from the squire; not so his love of order, method, and a liberal economy. The father, like many indolent people, delighted in being robbed—like most obstinate natures, was penny-wise and pound-foolish. Since the latter's illness, Jack was supposed to take much of the trouble off his hands in looking after the home farm, and managed the estate, subject to the supervision of the jealous, exacting, and utterly unreasonable invalid. In vain the son plodded, and laboured, and pondered, tramping about the acres by day, and racking his brains over the red account-book by night; some whim of the father was sure to nullify his happiest suggestions; and, exert himself as he would, he was, after all, but a man in fetters, liable at any moment to be tripped up, and get a sore tumble besides. Being, as I say, of a practical nature, he could not but perceive the proportion in which expenditure exceeded income; and this, too, gave him the uneasiness felt by every prudent person in like straits. To reduce the outlay on his own responsibility was impossible, and an expostulation with the squire only brought on a good deal of intemperate language and an amount of excitement very hurtful to the latter in his feeble state. At first, he tried to get Walter to interest himself in business matters, feeling that if anyone's advice could bias his father it would be that of the favourite son. This conviction was not pleasant for the elder brother; but he worked upon it nevertheless with considerable energy and complete failure. The hussar could not bring himself to take the slightest interest in grubbing about in the dirt, as he profanely termed the first and most essential of sciences. There was something of the squire's indolence and carelessness of consequences in Walter which, perhaps, endeared him

to his father as much as his personal good looks and the easy assumption of his manners both at home and abroad. Once, and for a few moments, Jack bethought him of enlisting Helen in the cause; but when he remembered her attendance on the invalid, his dependence on her for society, and the many hours they spent together alone, he refrained from adding more weight to the burden already sufficiently heavy which his sister carried so uncomplainingly. Altogether, Jack was not happy. He kept his cares to himself though, never even hinted at them to the others, and, night after night, pored over the red account-book, with a sickening heart indeed, but an honest steadfastness of purpose and determination to do the best he could.

Self-sacrifice is one of the most beautiful of virtues. It speaks well for our fellow-creatures, that they give us so many opportunities of cultivating it. If you choose, like Sir Walter Raleigh, to take the clothes off your back, and spread them in the mire to be trodden on, innumerable muddy feet pass over willingly enough, stamping them into shreds, and even spurning your garments for a while because they are not of the newest fashion. When you give a shoeless beggar the shilling which, perhaps, you cannot very well spare, with which you meant to have procured your early dinner, or taken your child to the Zoological, or bought the tobacco that is your only luxury, how do you know he does not curse you because it is not half a crown?

Being paid in gratitude is, after all, very embarrassing. It can seldom be gracefully tendered, more seldom gracefully accepted. If a man owes me five shillings, it is inconvenient both for him and me that he should liquidate his debt in copper, and I can imagine many circumstances in which I had rather not be reimbursed at all. Perhaps it is only fair that benefits should usually be welcomed with small thanks, and hardly ever be requited in kind. Even without the reversion thus purchased for the donor, the pleasure of conferring them is a very sufficient return; and while it is more blessed, most people will allow that it is also far more agreeable to *give* than to *receive*.

A story of Jack's schooldays perhaps illustrates his character better than whole pages of analysis. His younger brother was not only more advanced in learning, but took the lead from the elder in the playground as well. Not that he was as strong and active, as good at cricket or football, but that the self-reliance of his character imposed upon his comrades here, as subsequently on general society in the real

world. It is but justice to allow this, however, that in ability at lessons he was far superior to Jack. The latter succumbed cheerfully. His honest face would glow with delight when Walter was "commended" in Cornelius, or made a stunning catch at long-slip. There was no jealousy in Brooke, senior; and as for his generosity and good-nature, to use the boys' own expression, "There was not such a kid in the school!" Didn't he spend his pocket-money, treating the other fellows, almost before he got it? And hadn't he given Pinkes his ferret, the treasure most coveted in the whole society? white, vindictive, with red eyes, and far gone in the family-way, to console that mourner for the loss of his great-uncle, an old gentleman for whom Pinkes entertained a morbid terror and aversion, and on whose demise, I fear, that young dunce looked as a happy interposition, for that he would examine him in his humanities no more.

It was the custom in this, as in many other academies, to celebrate the Fifth of November with great glare and ceremony. The boys subscribed for fireworks; the ushers begged and bought faggots; a neighbouring farmer, known to the young gentlemen by the simple appellation of "Nobs," provided a tar-barrel, while the master contributed a half-holiday and his sanction to the proceedings. Then they yelled and shouted to their hearts' content, dancing and leaping like young savages round the bonfire; and by degrees, the dun smoke, studded with sparks, rolled heavily away, the flame streamed up into a shifting, flickering pyramid of fire; the Roman candles shot their luminous bullets into air, the rockets soared heavenward in glowing tracks, and fell again in showers of green and crimson and gold; squibs and crackers hissed and bounded about like fiery adders; Catherine wheels, revolving faster and faster, like illuminated kaleidoscopes, wheeled into one dazzling, stupefying, yellow blaze of glory; and then the lustre faded, the skeleton frame-work showed, the bonfire sank, the tar-barrel emitted a last feeble flash, the whole thing went out like a candle, and darkness was once more upon the earth.

During the height of the revels, however, it came to pass, that the spirit of mischief, never dormant in a schoolboy, prompted Walter Brooke to put a lighted cracker into the tail-pocket of Mr. Softly, the writing-master. The professor, unfortunately, carried other combustible preparations in the same receptacle. The result was a protracted and continuous explosion, inconvenient, ludicrous, and not devoid of danger.

It was some moments ere the sufferer knew exactly what had happened; and during that interval, Pinkes, the boy already mentioned, being of an excitable and impressionable temperament, moved, besides, by feelings of terror, mixed with considerable admiration, could not forbear exclaiming, "Oh, Brooke!" The professor, a married man with a family, naturally resenting an attempt to blow him into the air as an extempore Guy Fawkes, caught the name instantly, and did not fail to make his complaint, nor to show his scorched and ruined garment to the master. Short and summary is the justice of the rod. After school next morning, Jack must stand forth, face to face with the avenger. He marched up sturdily to the desk, with cold hands and a beating heart. Stern, measured, incisive, came the accents off the lips of that immovable Fate, over its high starched neckcloth.

"An outrage, flagrant, vindictive, and unparalleled—not only subversive of discipline in the school, but a gross offence to society at large, and a crime provided against by the laws of the land. What is the meaning of it? I ask you, Brooke, what is the meaning of it?"

"Please, sir, I didn't do it," said the poor little man, in a low voice, which rang nevertheless in his own ears like a trumpet.

"Please, sir, you didn't do it!" sneered the Fate. "Lie the first, sir—obvious, palpable, and supererogatory. Then please, sir, who did do it?"

"Please, sir, I don't know," answered the boy, more courageously this time, for his pluck rose as the danger drew near, and he felt that though he was telling a lie now it was one which stamped him a hero and a martyr in the dozen or two of opinions that constituted his little world.

"You don't know, sir!" repeated the cruel voice, jubilant now, yet repressed, in conscious power. "Then we must make you know, sir, and teach you to know better another time. Mr. Marks, the boys will attend for punishment."

Mr. Marks was the usher. The boys did attend for punishment, and Jack Brooke felt for the rest of the day as if he was standing in the thinnest continuations, with his back to a kitchen fire.

Jack shuts up the account-book at last, with a puzzled, weary expression, and doubts whether he won't have one more pipe before turning in. Tatters leaps exulting to the floor, and wags his tail for permission to take his usual place on the quilt. His master pulls off his old worn shooting-jacket with a yawn, and proceeds leisurely to undress.

Stripping, one by one, the garments from his fine athletic frame, something of discontent stirs within him at the thraldom and constraint in which he lives. Willingly, thinks Jack, would he change places with any day-labourer about the place. He could work at least as hard and patiently as his fellows, for the benefit of those he loves. He would be in no false position then; he would escape from the perpetual dissatisfaction with the present, the constant misgivings of the future. He would feel no inferiority amongst his comrades, those honest, hard-handed rustics, with whom strength and manhood are the only tangible qualities, and intellectual power entirely an unknown quantity. He could not be farther removed than he is now from all that he wishes to become; and perhaps he might be better appreciated by those who were dependent on his exertions for their bread. Yes, he would walk out cheerfully at sunrise, to earn his day's wages by his day's work, so that his father and Walter, and even Helen, and perhaps one or two others, might learn the stuff he was made of.

"Bosh! it's two o'clock in the morning," says Jack, out loud, "or I never should be such an ass as to get into this morbid strain. Hie up! Tatters. Good-night, you beauty!"

And he pauses, with the extinguisher in his hand, before putting out the candles, and turning in finally for his rest. "You beauty!" I must observe, was not addressed to Tatters, whose claims to that appellation would have borne considerable argument. It applied to a tawdry French print, which hung within sight of his pillow, and for which Jack cherished an admiration, unaccountable to the most intimate and confidential of his friends.

This work of art represented an impossible lady on an impossible horse, with an impossible hawk on her wrist, and an impossible hound at her stirrup. She wore the tightest of waists, the fullest of skirts, the most exaggerated of hats, and the most undisciplined of feathers. Her horse, sustained to all appearance by atmospheric pressure alone, danced and curveted airily on one leg, obviously without coercion from his rider, for the rein floated loose in her lap, and her tiny riding-whip was carried by the hound in its mouth. Clouds of dust constituted the background of this suggestive composition; and the only merit in the whole appeared to be the ingenuity with which the artist had combined so much levity of expression with such classic regularity of features. There was something in the face, too, that drew attention; a certain depth of tenderness in the eyes—a certain saucy

resolution about the mouth, attractive because so contradictory, without being entirely irreconcilable. The French print was like a French novel—ludicrous, exaggerated, unnatural, yet possessing a peculiar interest and fascination of its own.

Jack bought it in Paris, to which city he had been prevailed on to accompany Walter for a ten days' trip; the elder brother, I fear, furnishing the means out of his slender store. Walter used to make his father laugh with an imaginary description of its purchase. Jack's French, his blushes, and general confusion, while he explained to the smiling shopwoman which print he wanted, that voluble lady's coquetry and sly allusions, with the eventual discomfiture of the Englishman, and his departure in possession of the article at double its marked price. I say, imaginary, for the brothers were seldom together, except at dinner, in the gay city; and though Jack suffered from a fine chivalrous shyness amongst women, he had also a business-like, quick-sighted kind of common sense, that would detect and resist imposition from the most delusive dame who ever smiled across a counter.

Whatever he paid for the print, however, he seemed to value it very high. There it hung in the place of honour opposite his bed-head. His last look at night, his first in the morning, could scarce help resting on the winning eyes, and the saucy determined mouth. Pleasant dreams! honest Jack, and sound sleep! unbroken by the snores of Tatters, lying warm and cosy, coiled up on the quilt at your feet.

CHAPTER VII

A DRAGON'S TOOTH

WHEN Miss Brooke went out walking, she was not above the little coquetries of outward adornment practised by her sex. Dangerous, as young ladies can be, in the full lustre of candlelight, glowing, so to speak, in their war-paint, whirling their scalps and other trophies in the war-dance, and fully caparisoned at all points for the war-path, I think even the most formidable, to carry on the metaphor, looks more like "raisin' har'," when she sallies forth towards sundown, lithe, looped-up, and lightly accoutred either for flight or battle; to all appearance unexpectant yet at the same time not incapable of following up a trail (for the female nature is seldom quite unprepared to take a prey); and, conscious that her forces have been recruited by luncheon, while her weapons are brightened by the becoming influence of the evening breeze, equal to either emergency, the extension of a merciful prerogative, or the infliction of immediate death.

Leaning over a stile, and gazing down into the valley on the town of Middlesworth, a very well-dressed and rather showy-looking man smoked his cigar, apparently wrapped in deep meditation. The sound of Helen's step woke him from his abstraction, and the undisguised approval with which he stared at her as she approached was only excusable on the plea that it was months since he had seen anything in the shape of a young lady so entirely to his taste. Miss Brooke did look very handsome, as she came along a dry, sound path that crossed the well-drained field.

Her delicate cheek had caught a tinge of colour from the soft west wind, that lifted the heavy trails of black hair off her temples. The small well-shaped head, with its clear-cut features, was borne royally as usual; but with a jaunty carriage that sprang from the elastic step and free, graceful gestures of a perfect symmetry. Her lips were parted, as though she drank in with zest the pure autumnal air, and

her eyes sparkled with the light of health and animation. A dark woman with a colour has all her attractions increased tenfold. In repose she is very generally pale; she rides at anchor, as one may say, under the white flag—calm, stately, and peaceful; but when she shakes out her canvas and hoists the red ensign, not another craft that walks the waters need hope to take the wind out of her sails. Helen thought as little of her looks as any young woman who possessed a glass on her toilet-table; yet she must have felt beautiful, as she stepped lightly along, enjoying thoroughly the exercise, the landscape, and even the solitude, so pleasant after a whole morning spent in the library, listening to the squire's everlasting surmises and wearisome complaints.

The man with the cigar took a thorough inventory of her as she came on. He noted the turn of her tall round figure, set off by a close-fitting jacket, and a full fluted skirt, looped up over the striped stuff petticoat, with a rim of worked white edging underneath. He glanced admiringly at the slender, hollow feet, with their arched insteps, cased in supple, shining little boots, laced, soled, pieced, and strapped, in ridiculous imitation of those ponderous articles he wore himself on the heather or the stubbles. He was pleased to see, though it could not much matter to *him*, that over the straight trim ankles the bright-coloured hose clung close without a wrinkle; that the dark kid gloves fitted the taper hands without a crease. Nothing escaped him—not the heavy links of a gold bracelet at her wrist, nor the delicate lace-edged handkerchief peeping from her jacket pocket, nor the neat umbrella, much too small for use, that if once opened could surely never be folded so smooth again, nor even the heart-shaped locket, with poor papa's hair in it, that hung on a velvet ribbon round Helen's white neck.

All this, I say, he saw, as she drew nearer—and she came on pretty fast, I can tell you—nor seeing this could he repress a covert smile, a smile under the skin, that flitted over the man's face, and did by no means improve its expression.

He made way for her as she approached the stile, and removed the cigar from his lips. There is something in the presence of a real lady, to which the lowest bred man cannot but pay an unwilling, almost an unconscious deference; and this was not a low-bred man, far from it. He had been much more in society, and probably knew a great many more smart people than Helen; yet, taking the two as class

specimens, a child would not have hesitated in pointing out the aristocrat, and the plebeian.

He was a good-looking fellow too, and not in what could fairly be called a flash or vulgar style. Helen did not look at him, be sure, but she saw him nevertheless, and took in his general appearance, as young ladies can, at a glance, with her own eyes averted all the time. She observed that he had heavy, well-shaped features, small dark eyes, and large dark whiskers, a coarse mouth, very good teeth, a great deal of jewellery, and a remarkably bright colour; that his clothes were perfectly well-made (you must remember Helen had two brothers, one of them a dandy by profession), and though in no way remarkable, were of a fashion and material more adapted for town than country wear. She could not but admit that his figure was strong and well-proportioned, though a little inclined to corpulence, and that the bare hand in which he held his cigar was very plump and white, adorned, moreover, with a diamond ring of no small value; such a ring as is usually displayed in the foreground of professional men's portraits, meditating under crimson canopies, in irreproachable linen and suits of glossy black.

"Not quite a gentleman," said Helen to herself, as the man made way for her, and lifted his hat with a flourish: "what Walter calls a Brummagem swell, I think," and would have passed on without further notice, but that courtesy enjoined some acknowledgment, however distant, of his civility and his salute. There is hatred at first sight, as there is love. Helen was provoked with herself to feel such unreasonable repugnance towards a man she had never seen before, and was unlikely ever to see again. She would have been more provoked still had she analysed the cause of her dislike. So she inclined her head with that haughty, distant gesture, which is, I think, the next remove from a positive slap in the face, and passed over the stile with a dexterous whisk of her draperies, that nullified the half-step he made in advance, as though to offer his assistance.

He was determined to speak to her, nevertheless; and was rather irritated that he could not, on the spur of the moment, hit upon some pretext which should give him an excuse for doing so without the appearance of presumption. This was not a case in which he could follow her with his own pocket-handkerchief, affecting to think it was one she had dropped, or offer to remove imaginary briers from the skirt of her dress, or adopt the successful French plan, of informing the lady she has whitened her gown where she

could not possibly see it, and dusting it the while with many protestations of deference, and entreaties for forgiveness. Few people are sufficiently brutalised to make these advances to a lady, and for the true gentleman every woman is a lady; but with all her softness there was something about Helen that would have bidden the most callous nature pause before venturing on a liberty; so the man put his cigar in his mouth again as she passed on, and racked his brain for a question that should compel her to answer him. He was a connoisseur in voices; he was resolved to hear hers. If it was at all in character with her appearance, he would find out who she was, and see more of her. There was a good deal of persistency and determination hidden under that smooth, shining skin of his; a good deal of self-conceit and self-confidence; not an atom of conscientious scruple or remorse.

There was nothing for it but to ask his way. An old worn-out resource, indeed, yet which seemed to him the least offensive in the present emergency.

It would be absurd to inquire for Middlesworth. There was the town staring him in the face. He must think of some other locality. Hurrying after her, hat in hand, breathlessly, he "begged her pardon. There was a short cut somewhere here, and he was afraid he had missed it—would she kindly point out to him the nearest way to Bridlemere?"

Helen's colour deepened, for the hurrying steps brought to her recollection one or two stories she had heard of plausible footpads, wrenching watches and bracelets from unprotected damsels in lonely thoroughfares. She even calculated the defence she could offer with the neat umbrella, and her own speed of foot, for a quarter of a mile, the distance in which she could reach Dame Batters's cottage, and perhaps Jem's formidable aid; but the voice and manner were so thoroughly conventional and reassuring, that she halted and faced about boldly, pointing to the direction from which she came.

"That path takes you to Bridlemere, and on by the back of the stables into the high road."

She was going to tell him there was no right of way; but, after all, he had the appearance of a gentleman, and she checked the ungracious remark.

It was just the voice he expected, full, sweet, composed, the quiet patrician accent distinct on every syllable.

"Thank you very much," said the gentleman, with a profusion of bows and superfluity of politeness a little overdone. "I am most anxious to see Bridlemere; they say it

The Path to Bridlemere.

is such a charming place, such a beautiful old house. Perhaps you can tell me if I shall be disappointed? Perhaps you know it?"

"Perhaps I do," answered Helen shortly, for the man's demonstrative manner provoked her. "I live there."

"Miss Brooke, I beg you a thousand pardons," he exclaimed, raising his hat once more, and with as much ceremony as if he had been regularly introduced by a third person. "I did not expect; I was not aware"; and muttering something about "honour" and "pleasure," and so forth, he passed on, pretty well satisfied with his ingenuity in thus paving the way to an acquaintance with this beautiful young lady.

It cost him an extra walk, though, of more than a mile, for he was proceeding from a neighbouring estate, on which he held a mortgage, to the town of Middlesworth, and he could not, in common decency, but follow the path she had pointed out, as long as there was a chance of Helen turning round. He might have saved himself the trouble, however, for the latter walked on, looking straight before her, with her head rather higher than usual, and a smile of something akin to scorn curling her lip. Miss Brooke was not usually a person to be acted on by external influences, and to-day she had come out from a long and wearisome morning in the library, where she had settled the squire at last to his accustomed nap, with every inclination to enjoy her release; yet the weather, somehow, seemed spoilt within the last ten minutes. The sky was darker, and the wind had turned colder. It would be sure to rain before she could get back. No; it was none of these drawbacks, but I have said that there are such forces as antipathies. Some philosophers, indeed, opine that they are instincts implanted in our nature to guard us from future enemies, and it might have been something of this kind that affected the young lady all the way to Dame Batters's cottage door. Miss Brooke's step was hardly so light as usual, while she neared the porch of that lowly dwelling, to which she was welcome as the song of a wild bird, but Dame Batters recognised it from her chimney-corner, and folding her bare arms in her check apron, came forth to meet her visitor.

"Why, if here bain't our young lady," said the old woman, in a voice that constant practice of self-commiseration had toned down to a plaintive and somewhat irritating wail. "Miss Helen surelie; an' it do my old eyes good to see her —there, it do. Come in, miss, and set down now, an' rest a

bit, though it's little young bones like your'n knows of rest nor rheumatics neither." Here, remembering her rôle, the dame put one hand to her back, and puckered up her old face into a lamentable expression of bodily anguish.

"Why, I hoped the rheumatics were so much better," said Helen, in her gentle, soothing tones. "You told me that stuff had done you good. I can send you some more. We've got plenty of it at the Hall."

"Good, my dear," answered the patient, not without a certain triumph, for people like to be distinguished, even for the obstinacy of their rheumatism. "'Tain't likely now, is it, as anythink 'll ever do me good? It's in my bones, you see, miss; in my bones it is, and in my bones it'll stop, I know, till they lie in the churchyard, an' I shouldn't wonder if they was to ache a bit at odd times, even there."

This was said with a mixture of pride and resignation, such as that with which a man talks of the comfortable arrangements he has made for survivors after his demise, probably with as little perception of the reality thus anticipated; but it was Helen's especial nature to console. She had a good deal of practice at home: and indeed, when she went out, never failed to bear a ray or two of comfort along with her into every cottage on the estate. The poor people about Bridlemere loved the very ground she walked on, not because Miss Helen was such a "fine lady" as those simple rustics said, attaching to the epithet a far different meaning from that which it bears in cities, nor because she was generous with her money, as far as her slender means allowed, but that she possessed the sympathetic quality which interests itself in a neighbour's affairs as earnestly as in its own. This power of projecting the mind and feelings, as it were, into the very existence of others, when applied by means of diverse mental gifts, such as imagination, construction, tact, and ingenuity, to purposes of Art, and bridled, moreover, by a severe taste, constitutes Genius. When it exists simply with average brains, and a warm, honest heart, it merely approaches, and that very closely, the Apostle's definition of Charity. The poor are peculiarly susceptible of its influence, and the kindly word, which proves that the speaker not only pities, but understands the privations of indigence, or the temptations of vice, has warmed many a cold heart, reclaimed many a reckless nature, and raised many a fallen woman out of the mire in which she has been trodden down so ruthlessly.

Though Dame Batters was old, dirty, querulous, and to most people thoroughly uninteresting; though her precious

Jem was coarse, idle, drunken, and just thoughtful enough to be dishonest, altogether a very complete specimen of the village blackguard, Helen could listen as kindly to the long-winded complaints of the mother, could thank the son as sweetly for an act of sullen courtesy, as if the one had been a duchess and the other a dandy; nay, the duchess and the dandy would probably have found her far colder and more distant; would have voted her less easy to get on with, than did the humble inmates of the cottage.

Jem, unbraced, unwholesome, dishevelled and sodden-looking, rose from the fireside when the young lady entered, and hid a half-smoked pipe in a wholly dirty hand; then he dragged a wooden chair from its corner, knocked one of the legs home, pulled his greasy cap from its peg, wiped the seat, and grinning in extreme bashfulness, ground it severely along the sanded floor to Miss Helen.

Her rich young voice thanked him so musically as she sat down, that he stood spellbound, shifting from one leg to the other, and cramming his horny finger into the hidden pipebowl, not yet thoroughly extinguished, till he burnt it to the quick. Jem had changed his opinion all at once about Cissy Brown and Sue Stanion. How could he ever have compared those bouncing, brazen hoydens to such a shining vision as this? He would have given a gallon of beer now to have had his Sunday coat on; nay, to have only washed his face and hands at the pump.

Mothers have quick perceptions, even when they are old, stupid, and rheumatic. Dame Batters saw her son's confusion, and advanced at once to the rescue.

"He was always a bit dashed with the gentlefolk, was our Jem," said she, grinning significantly at her visitor. "He's not had the schooling, you see, miss, of some on 'em, along o' my being left a lone woman so young, my dear; for a sore heart is a heavy load, and a lame fut makes a long journey. Speak up, Jem," she added, turning briskly on her great sheepish son. "Speak up, and tell young miss the rights of it. He've got a job at last, miss, what he don't need to be ashamed of, this turn, and that's the truth."

Thus adjured, Jem rolled his eyes, gasped, grinned, and said nothing.

"I was sorry you were out of work so long," observed Helen quietly, ignoring the while the reason Jem had not been employed of late at the Hall, which she knew perfectly well. "I spoke to my brother for you, and I believe he spoke to papa, but you know papa has been so ill that

nothing has been decided either about the embankment or the farm-road, or the draining, so my brother says we have hands enough at present; but you see, Mrs. Batters, I hadn't forgot my promise the last time I was here."

All this was truth, but not the whole truth. What really took place was as follows: Helen interceded with Jack, who vowed he would not have such an idle, drunken rascal about the place, not if he would do a twelvemonth's work for nothing; but after much coaxing and entreaty from his beloved sister, whom, unlike most brothers, next to the lady in the French print, Jack esteemed the first of womankind, he consented to speak to the governor on the subject. Broaching it, as he hoped, in a lucid interval, the topic was received with such a storm of petulant anger that it fell incontinently to the ground, and was not thereafter alluded to. This was one of the many cases in which the squire liked his son to have all the trouble of looking after the estate, but none of its management. Helen was aware that she had no good news to impart, but it was her nature to be considerate with her inferiors, and she let Jem down as easily as circumstances would permit.

"He've got a job at last, though," resumed Dame Batters, rolling the check apron round and round her bare arms. "He've found a friend, have Jem; and they do say a man's best friend is him as pays him reg'lar. Fifteen shillin' a week, miss, *and* his beer. That's worth— What's your beer worth, Jem? You an' me counted it up a while since. But what call have I to count it up to you, Miss Helen? What's a young lady like you to know about beer?"

Helen blushed, as if she had suddenly been accused of drinking that sustaining fluid in large quantities. Nevertheless, the beer question seemed not devoid of interest, for she turned away from the old woman's keen, twinkling eyes, and addressed herself to the son.

"I hope, Jem," said she gravely, "that you won't buy any, now you can get as much as you want for nothing."

He could enter into this topic heartily.

"'Tain't the beer, miss," he explained deferentially, yet with conscious pride in the importance of the question, and his own familiarity with all its bearings. "'Tain't the beer; leastways, 'tain't the beer alone as done all the mischief. You see, miss, if a chap's dry, maybe, and he turns in and takes his half-pint, why it's neither here nor there. But when it's weather, and such-like, and a chap's hanging about the town, of a errand, we'll say, and, as like as not, without a dry

thread on him, why, I asks your pardon, miss, what's a chap to do? In a 'public,' you see, miss, he gets warmed both inside and out; then he takes his beer with a flourish of lacin' to it, as we calls it, miss; and one man he stands to a friend, and another man he stands to a friend; and it's, 'Jem, 'ere's luck, my boy,' an' 'Jem, you was always a staunch dog, you was'; an' 'Jem, won't you sing us a song?' I ask your pardon, miss, but that's the way the money goes, an' I've done with it, I have, for one while. There!"

He would have put his pipe in his mouth again, but that he suddenly remembered his manners, and did homage once more to Helen by stuffing it into his coat-cuff.

Dame Batters listened approvingly, and reached up to pat her son's burly shoulders, a caress he acknowledged with a shake and a grunt.

Helen was not tired of the beer question yet apparently, for she had something more to say.

"You haven't told me where your son is going to work?" she observed, looking intently out of doors, as though to see if the weather still held up. "I hope, for your sake, Mrs. Batters, it's not far from here?"

"Stoney Brothers," growled Jem, with a kind of jubilant defiance. "Stoney Brothers. That's the shop, miss — that is; and good luck to it, says I; good luck to both on 'em; for good chaps they be, and especially Master Phil."

"It's Mr. Philip, you see, miss, as got Jem the place," said his mother, interpreting, as it were, with a dignified politeness, to her visitor. "Mr. Philip, as has a good word and a kind for rich and poor, just like yourself, miss; and like will to like, as they say, for you can't keep cows from clover, nor yet cats from cream. And what I say is this: you tell me what a man gets actin' of, and I'll tell you what's the secret thoughts of that man's heart. Butter's bound to come if you do but keep the churn going; and there's not a mortal thing on this earth as Master Philip would think too good for them as comes of Bridlemere!"

Probably Miss Brooke heard not one word, for she was looking intently over the wide valley, with its broad, peaceful meadows, its dotted homesteads and lines of intersecting hedgerows, to the golden streak of sunset that seemed to be resting on the distant wooded hills. A November sky could scarcely look more settled, and Miss Brooke cared as little for a wetting as a mermaid, nevertheless she took an abrupt departure, hardly noticing Jem's grotesque bow, and wishing

his mother a hurried farewell, because she must get home before it came on to rain.

Was it only the pace at which she walked—five miles an hour, I really believe, and every footfall light and springy as a deer's — that brought so high a colour to her face? A colour that went and came a dozen times before she reached the stile where she met the man who asked his way, and whom she had now completely forgotten—a colour that if it would only settle in those delicate cheeks of hers, and remain for the ball to-night, when I daresay she would be very pale, must quite set at rest any discussions as to who was the best-looking young woman about Middlesworth, besides furnishing an extraordinary treat to the male muffatee-makers and other roughs in the town, who loved to congregate about the ballroom door, and watch carriage after carriage landing its cargo of white muslin, with remarks, it is but justice to say, neither loud nor obtrusive, though extremely sincere, on the respective merits of the competitors.

Perhaps anticipation of this very gathering may have had something to do with the additional bloom on the flower. It is difficult for middle-age—male middle-age especially—to realise a girl's dreams of expectation the day she is going to a ball. To her, I imagine, the ceremonial is a compound of excitement, hope, emulation, triumph, pleasure, business and dissipation, probably with a halo of romance glorifying the whole thing. It is her House of Commons, her Poor-law Board, her lecture-room, her hunting-field, the betting-ring of her racecourse, the deck of her frigate, the front of her general action. In this bright, smooth arena she concentrates the ambition, the amusements, the vicissitudes, the struggles, the victories—all the best and some of the worst feelings of the other sex—and yet we can sometimes find it in our hearts to grudge the curtailment of our claret, the trouble of dressing after dinner, the inconvenience of standing all night upon not the soundest of feet, in order that she may take her part in this all-important contest. She cannot go without us, more's the pity! Who knows? perhaps to-night she meditates the grand decisive stroke that is to affect her whole life! Shall indolence, self-indulgence, the cosy fireside, the roomy four-poster, seduce us from our duty as a man and a chaperon? Ring the bell. Get coffee. Tell John to put us out the whitest of neckcloths and the easiest of boots; order the carriage, but let it not come round till it is wanted, for great results are to be obtained only by careful preparation, and the slower she is in dressing, the more effective will be her

first appearance in the room ; our own purgatory is also thus curtailed a little at the nearer end.

Dame Batters looked long and wistfully after Miss Brooke's receding figure ; then she shook her head, and accosted Jem, who was sprawling over the fire to light his pipe.

"Jem," said she, "I never see our young miss look not half so well as she done to-night. Her eyes was as bright as diamonds. Wasn't 'em, Jem? Oh! my poor back!"

Jem made no immediate reply. It was his practice to be very chary of his words with his mother, which was, perhaps, the reason she gave him more than due credit for wisdom. I have observed the same result from a judicious reticence in every grade of society. Presently the germ of an idea formed itself in his mind. Puffing gravely at his pipe, he seemed to churn the thought, as it were, and knead it well, before he turned it out for inspection. Then he rose, stretched, yawned, and thus delivered himself—

"Mother?"

"Well, Jem?"

"D'ye mind the heifer as I druv' down the green lane and by our door here, last club-mornin' twelvemonth?"

"I mind her, Jem," replied the dame. "I was bad with the rheumatics that turn. Never a heifer has the 'squire bred since not half as good nor yet half as good-looking. No, nor Mr. Marks neither. You can't bake hot bread in a cold oven, Jem."

"That heifer wur the cleanest thing ever I saw, mother, bar our Miss Brooke."

"Bar our Miss Brooke," repeated the dame. "And you druv' her to the butcher's, Jem. Didn't ye now? I mind it well!"

"Iss," said Jem. "I druv' her to the butcher's."

CHAPTER VIII

MARKET-DAY

I HAVE already observed that Middlesworth, on occasion, was capable of as much bustle and confusion as if its normal state had been one of brisk commercial activity, rather than complete stagnation and repose. The surrounding country, consisting chiefly of pasture land, was not, therefore, very thickly inhabited; nevertheless, once in the week the streets of this prosperous town were so densely thronged as to become impassable to all but the most vigorous and resolute pedestrians. It seemed as if the adjoining districts poured their whole population—men, women, children, infants in arms, with all the horses, pigs, waggons, carts, live stock, poultry, dogs, and animals they could muster, into Middlesworth on market-day. As in all crowds, women predominated largely. They came along the highways and byways for hours during the forenoon, returning in clusters about dark; for, whatever distance they might have to journey, they seemed with one accord to defer their departure for home to as late an hour as possible. Strong, wiry, and able-bodied, her feminine roundness of form somewhat impaired and attenuated by hard fare and hard labour, what a day's work will one of these peasant women do in the fifteen hours of incessant employment that constitute her day! First astir in the humble household to light the fire and prepare her "master's" breakfast; last in bed at night, mending the clothes of the family by the dim flicker of one tallow-candle; every intervening moment has its appropriate task, lightened only by the refreshment of gossip, which she takes standing, and without respite from her employment, whatever it may be. There are the children to dress; there is the cottage to clean; bread to be brought home from the baker's; water to be drawn and carried from the well; the weekly stores to calculate, and a difficult problem to solve which repeated practice fails to simplify, namely, twelve shillings given, and fifteen required. How to make the sum answer! All the cleaning, all the cooking, all the

care, falls on one poor pair of shoulders, and they carry the weight with surprising energy and much loud complaint. To walk four or five miles backwards and forwards on a high-road because it is market-day, would scarcely seem a desirable addition to her usual task, yet is this weekly pilgrimage her much-prized substitute for the morning concerts, races, archery meetings, picnics, and shopping of the richer class. Wet or dry, frost or sunshine, with tanned face, drenched stockings, and draggled skirt, she plods along, the pattens and umbrella in one hand, the wicker basket—empty going, full returning—in the other. Whilst in the town she certainly does make the most of her time, loitering over her errands and prolonging her shopping to the utmost possible duration. Perhaps her amusements may be varied by the excitement of extricating a husband, father, or brother from some attractive pot-house and incipient fight; probably to coax him homewards, and guide his inebriated steps the whole way, propping him up, and replacing his hat, on an average, once in every hundred yards.

The Red Indian's squaw prays that her child may not be a girl, for "weary," says she, "is the lot of woman." Hedging, ditching, digging, draining, ploughing, turf-cutting, stone-breaking; however hard he works, I think the English labourer has a far easier time of it than the English labourer's wife. To say nothing of Eve's curse, she encounters as much physical exertion as his; and all the wear-and-tear of mind which her husband escapes. No wonder her comely Saxon face is furrowed, and her soft brown hair streaked with grey before her time.

Were it not for woman's dearest privilege, her never-failing luxury, how could she exist? The solace of conversation, the delightful employment of the tongue, the inspiriting exercise of question and reply; these smooth the roughness of her path, and turn her very tasks to pleasure and pastime. The debates of a rookery on a May morning; the cackle of the Trojan army, as described by Homer; the parrot-room at the Zoological in the Regent's Park: the shrillest and most overpowering of these discords would convey but a faint notion of the monster concert provided by female voices for market-day in the streets of Middlesworth; add to this, the shouts of drovers, the lowing of oxen, the squalling of pigs, the clatter of Stoney Brothers' waggons, whips cracking in the horse-market, a cheap-jack selling on the Parade, Strider's equestrian band performing in the Square, with the clang of the church clock striking surely more than four times in the hour, through

and above all; and it is reasonable to suppose that more than common steadiness of nerve and brain was required to buy even a yard of ribbon, in the midst of all this turmoil.

It was strange how the confusion seemed to quiet the quadrupeds, though they added their share of noise; it was but a feeble effort, and emitted, as it were, under protest. The pigs, indeed, vindicated their character for energetic and persistent rebellion; but the poor oxen lowed very meekly and pitifully; nor, aghast and utterly stupefied by the surrounding clamour, would the young horses show sufficient mettle to attract a purchaser.

The whole town was, more or less, pervaded by general confusion; but its streams all converged in one whirlpool, where also booths were erected for the further discomfort of the public, namely, the open space in front of the Plantagenet Arms. Here a dray had stopped with beer, a coal-cart was discharging its load, five market-women—all with parcels, three with children—had wedged themselves into an impenetrable phalanx. The omnibus was starting from the door, and a farmer's gig, driven by an old man and drawn by a young horse, blocked up the archway. But for great perseverance, and the exertion of much personal strength, Ragman de Rolle, struggling through the crowd, could never have reached his destination, the portals of this long-established hotel and posting-house—the well-known Plantagenet Arms.

Rags was in his usual health and spirits, in that state which he himself designated as very fit, coming from the performance of his duty, or rather, of his friend's duty; he shone, not indeed in the blaze of review order, but in the milder lustre of frogged frock-coat, gold-laced forage cap, much on one side, without a peak, and a pair of killing steel spurs. In this costume, Rags felt more equal to a social emergency than in the obscurity of plain clothes. The chambermaid and waiter looked after him admiring, as he passed into the bar; and when he reached that *sanctum*, Miss Bolt, its presiding priestess, received him with a giggle and a toss of her sleek head which denoted partiality and approval.

"You'll take your glass of brown sherry, as usual, Capting de Rolle?" said Miss Bolt, offering at the same time a bumper of that mixture (price one shilling), with a pretty hand garnished by many rings, whereof, the newest, I believe, had been presented, in all honour, by generous Rags. He was a favourite, you see, as might be gathered from her condescending manner and frequent repetition of his name, with the military title she bestowed on all ranks of officers prefixed.

"Rags" fetching Miss Bolt.

"Is Capting Brooke in the barracks? You can tell me, Capting de Rolle, I daresay. A gentleman have been here, asking for him, repeated."

Rags was gulping at the sherry, and preparing a compliment whilst he swallowed it.

"He would have been, but I am on duty for him," answered the hussar; adding, gallantly, "I don't regret it either, for it keeps me in the town you brighten with your presence, Miss Bolt!"

"Go along with you now, do," replied the lady, who appreciated flattery none the less that she knew it was fired off in jest. "I never see such a man as you, Capting de Rolle, for your cajoleries—flummery, I call it. I wonder what you take me for, I do."

Miss Bolt had passed many years in citadels such as that in which she was now entrenched; surrounded by outworks of glass, pewter, beer, brandy, nets of lemons, jars of pickles, baskets of game, bottles of bitters, and brown paper parcels; fortified, moreover, by her own rigid sense of decorum, she could afford to do what execution she pleased on a besieging force, and laugh at its efforts to return her fire. These ladies who live habitually before the public, allow themselves, it is true, considerable latitude of speech and manner. Their circle is no doubt a large one; but they are careful not to overstep its boundary. In flirtation they are great proficients. How, indeed, can it be otherwise? Practising it as they must, hour after hour, and day after day, for months together, with every class of the male species, from peers to potato-salesmen, including the commercial traveller—a variety no less remarkable for audacity of wit, than for fluency of language—in that choice kind of repartee which depends for its success on pointed personal allusion, they are unrivalled; and they possess, moreover, the advantage of a partial audience, and an encounter on their own ground; but with all their freedom of speech, they deny themselves, scrupulously, a corresponding liberty of action; with every temptation to evil, they are almost without exception untainted by vice; and, to use their own language, "know their place, and take care to keep theirselves respectable."

It did not cost Rags much trouble to finish a glass of brown sherry; yet, ere he had half swallowed his shilling's worth, as many different characters had come into, and gone out of Miss Bolt's *sanctum*, as pass and repass the stage of a theatre in a pantomime.

The Chairman of Quarter Sessions, burly, good-humoured,

and gentleman-like, happy mixture of squire, sportsman, and magistrate, paused there to desire his Clerk of the Peace might be sent to him forthwith. He was sixteen stone, and a grandfather; nevertheless, he congratulated Miss Bolt on her good looks and brilliant earrings; wishing himself, he said, "a young man, and a sherry drinker again, for her sake." Miss Bolt, much gratified, returned the compliment in kind, with a sportive allusion to his youthful appearance, which sent the old gentleman away shaking his jolly sides. He was succeeded by a High-Church rector, starched to the ears, and buttoned to the chin, who asked for a parcel of books, that should have come down by train; but, of course, had not arrived. For him, Miss Bolt took pains to explain the railway arrangements, which were indeed sufficiently complicated, and in the disentanglement of which the good man showed less than his usual powers of perception: even *his* last words, however, were, "I trust everything to you, Miss Bolt!" But, before Rags could remark, in a loud whisper, "What touching confidence!" Mrs. Marks, from the new farm at Bridlemere, brought her little boy to be taken care of, while she went to look for Marks in the horse-fair. Miss Bolt turned from a business-like coquette to a loving matron in the twinkling of an eye. She stuck the little man against the back of an armchair, put a sweet biscuit in his fist, and was down on her knees smoothing his flaxen curls, and making friends with him, before Rags could express admiration of her fondness for children, and regret that she had not a bouncing family of her own. The boy, sticking his fat legs straight out, and making round eyes, as children do when utterly at a loss, suffered himself to be comforted with considerable philosophy, and gazed in undisguised wonder at De Rolle's general appearance, and the rapid succession of Miss Bolt's visitors.

Mrs. Marks was hardly gone ere Marks appeared, looking for her, and that smart young agriculturist could not think of following his wife without a word for his firstborn and a glass of sherry and bitters for himself: then he got into conversation with Rags, on the merits of a certain young horse; and still an endless stream of Miss Bolt's admirers poured in and out. The auctioneer, from the market-place, portly, well-whiskered, and high-coloured, with his thumbs in the armholes of his black satin waistcoat, and his white hat stuck very much over one eye; the rising apothecary, from round the corner, clean-shaven, white-cravated, smooth-spoken, affecting a gravity beyond his years, and the general pomposity of an

authorised physician; one of Mr. Dowlas's young men, with a parcel Lady Julia had ordered and forgotten; the sporting saddler Will Whipthong, a little "sprung," from having entertained a few friends at an early dinner; two grave men who had ordered tea at four p.m., and who looked like undertakers, but were, in reality, agents for the establishment of a new branch bubble bank. George Stoney asking for his brother Philip, and presently, Philip asking for George; a little girl, belonging to nobody, who wanted change for a doubtful half-crown; the cellarman, the head ostler, the parish clerk, the tax-gatherer, and presently, a select detachment of the commercial gentlemen, smiling, self-confident, and *débonnaire*, fresh from their dinner in the commercial room.

It was long odds against Rags; but he made a good fight of it, notwithstanding. The frogged coat, the spurs, the indispensable riding-whip, the brown sherry, and a huge cigar, inspired him with confidence. He bandied jests with the auctioneer; he stared the apothecary out of countenance; he accepted Will Whipthong's flattery, not entirely disinterested, with a good-humoured condescension. A second glass of sherry put him on equal terms with the commercial gentlemen, who are always inclined to be sociable, especially with military men, and the rest of the visitors he found himself in a position to ignore.

Rags felt he was monopolising Miss Bolt—such is the vanity inherent in the male sex, that it was gratifying to know himself the object even of a barmaid's admiration; and he accepted it thirstily, as an earnest of successes to come in a higher sphere.

Perhaps he was right. To kill a salmon, and to land a trout, are efforts of the same skill, differing only in degree. The nobler fish demands but stronger tackle and a gaudier fly—a greater hardihood, perhaps; but not a whit more art. Cinderella at the ball is still the Cinderella of the kitchen. Toothless Lyce's heart is as near her lips as that of smiling, whispering Lalage. Castle and cottage surrender alike, when they begin to parley. Neither the duke's nor the dairyman's daughters are proof against subtle stratagem, bold assault, or persevering blockade. From Dido to Dorcas; from Pasiphae to Pamela, few, when they find it, but will bend to the master-hand. Though all are riddles, it seems there is but one solution for the whole sex, and Congreve was not perhaps much mistaken when he makes them sing—

> Nothing's new except our faces:
> Every woman is the same.

Rags was getting on swimmingly. It took him, indeed, several seconds to prepare his little speeches; but they were received cordially; and notwithstanding frequent interruptions, responded to graciously in kind. The conversation proceeded somewhat as follows:—

Rags, with the utmost sweetness, "How nicely you do your hair, Miss Bolt. I haven't seen such hair as yours since we marched into Middlesworth. I suppose you wouldn't give a poor fellow a lock of it; would you now?—though you have plenty to spare, and it's most of it real, of course."

Miss Bolt, laughing in a succession of short, shrill gasps, "The idea; I should have thought you knew better than to"—

Waiter, entering in a hurry, perspiring freely, "Glass of sherry and bitters, for No. 4."

Miss Bolt, hardening once more in the exercise of her profession, "You know I can't abide flummery, Capting de Rolle. I'm sure if I thought you was serious, I should be very"—

Same waiter, only a trifle warmer—

"Two teas, an' a pint of ale, for No. 5."

Rags, taking refuge in the last drop of his sherry—

"I know I should be very—yes, very grateful. I'd put it in a locket, and hang it round my neck, and never take it off, even to shave.

> And if anyone was asking me the reason why I wear it,
> I'd say it's 'cause my true love is"—

Waiter re-entering, compelled at last to mop his face with a dinner-napkin—

"Two letters and a parcel, for No. 6."

Second waiter, approaching with noiseless step, and an air of perfect candour—

"Party in the coffee-room wishes to know when No. 6 will be back?"

Landlord's daughter, a small child, with her front teeth gone, and not yet replaced, lisping painfully—

"Father says, please Miss Bolt, did No. 6 have his letters before he went out?"

Head ostler, venturing but half his person, huskily, as one whose rest is habitually broken, and who drinks a mixture of gin and hay-seeds—

"From the Telegraph office—message for No. 6!"

Miss Bolt—"Bother No. 6!"

And when Rags, improving his opportunity, condoled with her on the hardships of her position, the variety of her duties, and the public nature of a department in which she was wasting her sweetness, though she neither blushed nor remained unseen, he was a little piqued to observe that her attention wavered obviously, and fixed itself on a voice in the passage giving certain directions, in which the words "servant," "lodge," "luggage," and "fly," were alone audible.

It was a mellow, manly voice, grave in tone, rather than sad, and with a peculiarly clear enunciation of each syllable. A listener might be sure, without seeing him, that the owner had good teeth, and shut them tight together when he spoke.

Miss Bolt listened for a second or two with the utmost earnestness; then a smile, like a sunbeam—a very different smile from those she kept by her for daily use—broke over her face. She shook her earrings till they jingled again; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and she looked twice as pretty now, while she clasped her hands, and exclaimed—

"Goodness, gracious me! I do declare, if there isn't Sir Archibald!"

She guessed right. While she spoke, the person she called Sir Archibald entered the bar. A man of middle age—nay, middle age is but a relative term, according to the distance at which those who use it believe themselves to be from either end of the rope. Here, where it is made fast to the shore, a few fathoms out constitute middle age; yonder, where it drips already with the spray, and is about to lose itself in the silent sea, an inch or two yet farther out is considered still to indicate this doubtful period. I remember when I thought a man of five-and-thirty middle-aged. I call him a young fellow now. Well, it is not worth discussing—"A soldier's a man; a life's but a span," and its termination as uncertain at one period as another; so that, for most of us, there is no such thing as middle age after all.

Sir Archibald, then, was a good bit over fifty; but, like many men who have spent their youth in a life of constant toil and hardship, he seemed rather to have hardened and toughened from repeated kneading than worn by the friction of continuous use. His walk was springy and elastic; his frame very spare and muscular. Every atom of superfluous flesh seemed to have been absorbed by exercise, or drained from his system by the action of tropical heat. His very face was but skin and bone. Skin tanned, bronzed, and wrinkled; bone harsh, angular, and prominent. The whole clean shaved,

all but a heavy moustache, which, like his hair, was rapidly turning white. Nevertheless, there was beauty still, and that of an engaging kind, in the old, worn face; beauty such as a young girl loves to look upon, and weave for herself a drama of passion, adventure, and romance, as acted out by the possessor—

> So bronzed, so marred, of more than twice her years.

She gives it credit for former attractions, which perhaps it never possessed; destroyed by dangers and vicissitudes, on which perhaps it never looked. There is many an Elaine who allows her fancy to be thus captivated by a veteran Launcelot; kindling, it may be, in turn, the embers of a dead grey fire into a feeble transient glow. Her fancy only, not her heart; poor girl, let her keep that treasure for a younger, brighter, fresher, more congenial love. This old man looked indeed as if his past career had been of no common order, as if his character was one of no conventional cast. It was something in the eyes that betrayed him, that contradicted the quiet, matter-of-fact, respectable appearance of dress and demeanour he thought it consistent with his time of life to affect. They were very keen, dark, and bright; set deep under a pair of bushy brows, which still retained their youthful blackness. There was habitually that glitter in them which you will never observe but in eyes that are accustomed, day by day, to stare death out of countenance, which the youngest and freshest recruit acquires in six weeks' campaigning, if pretty close to the enemy; also, at times, they shone with a soft, deep, tender lustre that spoke of ardent affections, undying regrets, and holy, hopeless love, chastened by memory into a religion, bearing to look back on the past, because it could look forward to the future, having nothing to lose now, and therefore nothing to fear.

Do not think, however, that his was a countenance those who run may read. Sir Archibald was the last person to carry his heart on his sleeve. To the casual observer, he was but a shrewd, hard, practised man of the world — a little abrupt, a little caustic, and somewhat intolerant of anything like weakness or want of common sense.

His popularity, nevertheless, seemed to extend beyond the bar, from which retirement Miss Bolt handed him a light for his cigar, with as much delighted deference as if he had been a prince of the blood. Marks, returning for his child, welcomed him back to the country with a perfect storm of con-

gratulations. The head ostler stood grinning at him through a window that commanded the passage. A buxom chambermaid came in three times for the same order, beaming brightly on Sir Archibald, and was rebuked, reasonably enough, by Miss Bolt for carelessness and inattention. The landlord's little daughter recognised him, and held up her toothless mouth to be kissed. The very boots touched his fur cap, and was glad to see "Sir Archibald looking so well." Philip Stoney, again in search of George, shook hands with him enthusiastically, and was quite pleased to be asked concerning the well-being of the chestnut horse. Everybody in Middlesworth seemed to know this brown man, with his white moustaches, and to be glad to see him back.

"Who is he?" whispered Rags to Miss Bolt. "Seems a popular chap—ought to stand for the town."

"What! don't you know Sir Archibald?" replied the barmaid. "I thought everybody knew Sir Archibald. Why, he is"—

Hot waiter entering in a hurry—"No. 6 come in! Letters, parcels, bottle of soda-water to No. 6!"

"Everybody don't know him, you see," persisted Rags; "for I don't. What's his name? Where does he hang out?"

"Well, he don't live here—more's the pity," replied Miss Bolt, frowning reprovingly the while at the continuous tingling of a bell, which professional instinct told her was jerked by the impatience of No. 6, and which, it is needless to observe, rang immediately outside the door distinguished by that numeral. "He don't live near here, but he's often amongst us at odd times. You see, Sir Archibald is the"—

Interrupted again by the warm and noiseless waiter, velvet-footed, and perspiring, as before—

"Half a lemon, lump sugar, wax candles, dozen sheets of note-paper and envelopes, for No. 6."

"Well, I'm sure! I wish No. 6 was farther!"

"And who the deuce is No. 6?" burst from Miss Bolt and Rags simultaneously; but it appeared that Sir Archibald knew even No. 6, for almost while they spoke, he turned to shake hands with a dark, fresh-coloured, smartly dressed gentleman, who entered the bar to complain that his orders were not attended to with the despatch he required.

"The last place I should have expected to meet you in, Multiple," said Sir Archibald, who did not seem to like No. 6 as well as No. 6 liked him.

"Delighted to see you, I'm sure!" replied the other, with

a cordiality perhaps a little overdone. "Business brought me here, as you may suppose—business and pleasure combined —or I shouldn't be staying in this cursed hotel."

Miss Bolt looked daggers.

"Gentleman!" said she. "Nice gentleman you are, I think!—not my sort, at anyrate." But her sort of gentleman, or none, he was a customer, so she wisely said it to herself.

"That means you are going to the ball to-night," observed the other; and Miss Bolt thought he drew his bushy eyebrows down over his eyes closer than before.

"I suppose I must look in for half an hour," answered Mr. Multiple, running his white hand through his black hair. "Not much to tempt one, I fancy, though, down here. You know the people better than I do, Sir Archibald, beauties and all. I suppose the whole thing is very provincial?"

There was a gleam of amusement in Sir Archibald's eye, but he observed, with creditable gravity—

"A London man is quite a windfall here, Multiple. The Middlesworth girls are celebrated for tenacity. If you dance, they'll run you off your legs, like an over-driven post-horse. If you sit still, they'll swarm about you, like flies round a honey-pot. I advise you to look out; not one of them but carries her grapnels, and they don't drag their anchors, I promise you."

Multiple suspected his friend was laughing at him. He was shrewd enough to know that vanity as regards the other sex was his foible, and to conceal his weakness as far as possible; also the fencer's first instruction, never to betray how nearly his guard had been broken, so he answered gravely—

"A ball is a ball, even a hundred miles from town. I've done a good day's work to-day, and I have a right to amuse myself. Two-and-twenty letters written, and a ten-mile walk, Sir Archibald. Pretty well that for a Cockney?"

"I hope you have made it answer," was the reply; "a man ought to be handsomely paid for all that exertion of body and mind."

"I must have turned about five hundred," said Multiple carelessly. "You make your 'monkey' in a shorter time on a race-course, but really it's almost as hard work. It's not worth my while to be absent from our place under a good many hundreds, as you know, Sir Archibald."

"Indeed, I did not!" replied the latter; "but I'm glad to

hear it, for your sake. I only wish my time was half as valuable"; and he wondered the while what could induce his friend to make this astounding statement. He knew him well enough to be aware that its truth or falsehood had nothing to do with its enunciation. He reflected that the other knew him also well enough to have spared his breath. What puzzled him was, why it should be published here, for the benefit of a barmaid and a young officer in undress.

"It's a nice country about Middlesworth," added Multiple, in a sly, soliloquising tone. "I've seen the prettiest view to-day that has pleased my eye for a long time, and that sort of thing makes an impression on me. I am like Beppo's Count, you know, Wax to receive, and marble to retain. I must have another look at it before long. And where do you think I've been, Sir Archibald, on my way back? Why, right through the park at Bridlemere."

The bushy eyebrows went down this time without a doubt. Miss Bolt was watching them, and she was sure of it.

"A fine place, isn't it?" said Sir Archibald carelessly; "and been a long time in the family. Good-morning, Multiple; I'm rather late as it is, and must be moving now." So, with a courteous bow to Miss Bolt, who returned it enthusiastically, he walked forth, and plunged into the whirlpool of traffic still seething, and roaring, and raging, in front of the Plantagenet Arms.

Mr. Multiple retired to consume the additional dozen of note-paper and envelopes in the imaginary privacy of No. 6. Rags and Miss Bolt whispered confidentially on matters, I imagine, of a nature which she designated flummery; and Sir Archibald, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, walked down the High Street of Middlesworth, absorbed in profound, and apparently somewhat anxious meditation.

Whilst in the heart of the town, and in the midst of the market-day bustle, he was interrupted at every step by some hearty greeting, some weather-beaten face; but as he gradually approached its outskirts, these became less frequent; and by the time he reached the bridge of which I have already spoken, he was in complete solitude, and immersed in his own thoughts.

To judge by his face, these were of no very enviable nature. Its expression had quite changed since he first accosted Miss Bolt, in the bar of the Plantagenet Arms. Then he was bright, benevolent, and smiling; now he seemed anxious, uneasy, and even wretched. He jerked the end of

his cigar into the stream, with an impatient action that suggested an oath, and walked on very fast, taking the footway to Bridlemere.

It was late in the afternoon, within an hour of dark; a breeze, rising with the approach of night, sighed mournfully through the woods that crested the rising ground about the Hall. He reached the stile at which Helen had bestowed her unwilling answer on the pedestrian, but there was no need for Sir Archibald to ask his way. No need, for every gleam in the landscape, every fence, every furrow, every tree in the hedgerows, seemed burnt in, as it were, by fire, on his memory. There was no more chance of his forgetting them than there is of your forgetting that summer sunset when heaven seemed to have come down for you upon earth; or that cold, leaden dawn, when you looked about you, stupefied, and wondered whether there could be sorrow like to your sorrow, and spoke to your crushed heart aloud, telling it that henceforth there was neither hope nor rest for ever; laughing, perhaps, in bitter scorn, rebellious and erect, where it had been wiser to kneel, and weep, and pray.

If Sir Archibald had been stricken blind some twenty years before, he could still have described every turn in that walk from Middlesworth to Bridlemere as plainly as he saw it to-day.

A man who has lived half a century, cannot but have known strange and sad experiences. It needs no stirring career, it needs no mighty tempests on the great ocean of life, to have made him familiar with its dangers and its shipwrecks. There are quicksands, shifting and treacherous, in the shallows; there are hidden reefs for him who creeps along the shore. The barque that stands boldly out into blue water is perhaps the safest, after all. But whatever his course has been, and whatever reverses he has met with, memory is to him either a blessing or a curse, according as he is climbing slowly, wearily, yet hopefully, towards the golden hills, or speeding faster and faster, reckless, on his downward way.

Horace tells us, and the heathen poet was a philosopher in his way, that nothing can rob us of the past. A sound crack on the pate, producing concussion of the brain, had probably escaped his reasoning. We are neither philosophers nor heathens, and have a nobler and fuller satisfaction in the conviction that nothing can rob us of the future. And is there not some strange, mysterious affinity, of which we are

vaguely conscious, like men in a dream, between the past and the future? For good, though not for evil, shall not that which hath been be again? Sin and sorrow, we believe, will indeed die to all eternity; but shall not love, though it has come down on earth to be bruised and soiled, and trodden under foot, shed its well-remembered fragrance around us again, renewed and purified, holy and stainless, for ever in heaven?

Sir Archibald's brow cleared as he walked on. Soon he entered the park, and made straight for the shrubberies that surrounded the house of Bridlemere. Now and then he paused, as if to note some alteration; a vista that had closed, a plantation that had grown up, or a tree that had been cut down. His eye grew brighter at every step, and presently, stooping to unfasten the gate of the wire fencing that protected Helen's garden, something like a tear trembled on his eyelash. If so, it was a tear of pure and unmixed joy, for a woman's light footfall came fast along the walk, a woman's dress rustled amongst the evergreens, and Helen, emerging from their shadow, seized him violently by both hands, shaking them up and down with a triumphant welcome, while she exclaimed rapidly, and breathless with the haste she had made—

"I rushed to the front door when I heard the fly; then I knew you'd walked, and I was sure you'd go through my garden, and oh, Uncle Archie, I'm so glad you're come!"

CHAPTER IX

UNCLE ARCHIE

TO account for Sir Archibald's arrival at Bridlemere, and his cordial reception by his niece, it is necessary to look into his antecedents, and for the elucidation of these I must ask you to go back quite a quarter of a century, and to take your position with me on the wide doorsteps of a certain edifice in St. James's Street, which was then known as Crockford's Club.

At that period this was a favourite resort with some hundreds of the gentlemen of England, who, finding life in London not sufficiently varied and interesting during the rest of the twenty-fours into which they contrived to condense a week's amusement, were accustomed to congregate here at midnight, for the purpose, so they said, of social gossip and cigar smoking.

I am bound to accept this explanation, for there were certainly many temptations to remain upstairs, within — a large, lofty drawing-room, heavily furnished and decorated, all gold and crimson—a long supper-room, lustrous with innumerable wax-lights, glancing and glittering on glass, plate, china, and the gaudy variety of the choicest supper that could be laid for a hundred epicures, on a snowy-white tablecloth. Here, feasting at the board, sat scores of the best-known and best-looking faces in London, in clean white neckcloths, and the rigid costume of the English gentleman dressed for dinner, but all with their hats on. Waiters, solemnly and studiously attired, handed different delicacies about with dignified persuasion, and proffered cooling drinks, of skilful compounds, in which champagne was the weakest and least expensive ingredient. Naturally, there was no want of conversation, yet, at intervals, above the hum of

voices, might be heard a subdued rattle, and a sharp, though smothered rap, proceeding from an adjoining apartment, where shaded lamps shed a softer lustre on a long green table, protected from the doorway by a folding-screen. Here people played hazard, and played it very high. Now and again a performer would enter the supper-room quietly and unobtrusively, to take his place at the board, but his success, or the reverse, could hardly be gathered from his demeanour. The winners, I think, seemed more inclined to trifle with "cups," and such mixtures, whilst the losers plunged rashly into lobster-salad, and drank their champagne unadulterated. Perhaps, to a very intimate friend, one would hold up two or more white-gloved fingers (they always played in white kid gloves), to indicate the landing of so many hundreds; or another, with a scarce perceptible shrug, might whisper, he had "had a baddish night," but beyond this, the external composure observed would have edified a stoic. A man might be made or marred, but he gave no sign. Then whether he lost or won, ate or drank, he would go down and smoke his cigar in the cool night-air on the steps.

It is but a few minutes past twelve. Very hot, even here outside. People have hardly arrived yet from the House, from the opera (there is only one opera in this remote period, and Grisi is young, and oh, how beautiful! with a voice

> To draw
> Another host from heaven, to break heaven's law),

from their various evening haunts and evening engagements. So two young gentlemen, of whom one is subsequently to become a peer, and the other a gold-digger, have the steps to themselves. They are well-dressed, well-looking, and betray that air of being bored, without being tired, which sits so naturally on men who have nothing to do, and do it perseveringly, from morning till night.

Says the future peer to the future gold-digger—"What has become of Archie Brooke? Wasn't here last night; wasn't here night before. Can't be gone out of town, for I saw his servant to-day. Didn't ask servant; fool not to."

Gold-digger, much exhausted from having sat for an hour in the drawing-room at White's, over the way—"Wouldn't have told you. Good man; never knows. Wouldn't say his master was in the next room if you were talking to Archie through the door. Wish my man would send me away; try for Brooke's."

Peer prospective—"Wonder if he's bolted. Deuced hard up. Won a cracker here three nights ago; suppose he'd take that with him. Brother wouldn't pay his debts, of course."

Gold-digger *in posse*—"Of course not! Know mine wouldn't. Here comes Tiny. Same regiment. Safe to know."

Tiny, who is something over six feet high, with a merry, girlish face at the top, and who is going to the bad as fast as only a mother's darling can, bounces up the steps, and is stopped by the pair.

"Brooke?" says Tiny, in answer to their inquiries. "Gone a crowner! No end of a crowner! Sent in his papers. I'm sorry for it, though it gives me a step. I say, I think I shall go in and have a shy."

So they all go in, and "have a shy," in which process Tiny anticipates his one-and-twentieth birthday to a tune that astonishes even the family man of business, when he comes to arrange this young gentleman's affairs.

It was perfectly true. Archie Brooke, in a regiment of the Guards, popular, good-looking, fond of London, fond of society, above all things fond of his profession and his battalion, had sent in his papers to sell, and taken his brother officers completely by surprise. His Colonel, an old Peninsular (there were Peninsulars then, as there are Crimeans now), had a private interview with him, to dissuade the most promising of his chickens from so irremediable a step. If it was money matters, he even proposed to help him, and that was a fine trait in the old soldier, and appreciated as such by the young one. No; it was not money. He offered to show the Colonel his account at Cox and Greenwood's with some hundreds (I fear partly the produce of the "cracker" above hinted at) standing to his credit. Why was he resolved, then, to throw all his chances so completely overboard? Had he got into a scrape? Would he confide in his old friend and Colonel? Unless it was very bad indeed, surely they might pull him through. No; he was in no scrape. He required no pulling at all. He was resolved to leave London—to leave England. There were reasons for it, he told the Colonel; strong reasons; he could not explain; and in ten days from that interview with his commanding officer, Captain Brooke, late of the Brigade of Guards, was dazzling his eyes in the sun-glint off the blue Mediterranean, from the quay at Marseilles.

I presume nobody ever remained in that city an hour longer than necessary, combining, as it does, the dirt, the

heat, the sterility of Africa, with the incessant bustle and activity of France. It was not long before Brooke found himself in Algeria, on terms of the utmost cordiality with a whole French garrison, in the city of Constantine. Here his military predilections tempted him sorely to don the large, loose *pantalon*, and well-cut braided jacket of the Chasseurs d'Afrique. What he wanted was excitement, adventure, incessant effort, and oft-recurring danger; something to stifle memory, and leave no time for thought. A campaign against the Khabyles would be the very thing. But he could not quite make up his mind about the justness of the Frenchman's cause. Was it right thus to hunt the Emir to death for the advancement of civilisation? Was it worthy of the great nation thus to appeal, unprovoked, to the arbitration of the sword? Campaigning for sheer bitterness of spirit was all very well, but there were two sides to the question, just as there were two opposing forces to constitute the campaign. The arguments were nicely balanced, and Archie Brooke, at this period of his life, was no great casuist. He could not make up his mind whether he ought to draw the sword with the invaders, or join "the long-winged Hawk of the Desert," fighting gallantly for independence, and liberty, and life.

The story goes that the ex-Guardsman, sitting in a *café* at Constantine, by a little round table covered with a marble slab, having a glass of *absinthe* before him, an infamous French cigar in his mouth, and a gay party of French subalterns looking on, deliberately tossed up whether he should ride in their ranks as a volunteer, or pass the outposts at once, and offer his services to Abd-el-Kader. The louis came down tails, and the chivalrous Frenchmen shook hands with him all round, wishing him a cordial and kindly farewell, though henceforth they would never meet again save as cruel enemies in a warfare so fierce that quarter was too seldom asked, and indeed far too often denied.

Archie Brooke turned up again with a tanned face and a close-shaven head, under a white *burnouse*, at Abd-el-Kader's right hand, when the Emir held a certain review, in which ten thousand of the chivalry of the desert ranked past him, horse by horse, and man by man. Horse clean, wiry, sinewy, untiring; man spare, swarthy, fierce, unconquered: the beast and its master remarkable alike for flashing eye, distended nostrils, clean, small, noble head, and a haughty, tameless bearing that seemed to smack wildly of the waste.

The Emir himself looked no unworthy leader for such a

host. His keen eye glittered like a falcon's under the snowy hood which threw his war-worn face into deep shadow. His nervous, wiry figure, of which the muscular proportions were scarcely concealed by the loose, white garments that drooped about him, sat erect upon his lofty cumbrous saddle, unlike those of his chiefs, ornamented only by a border of seed-pearls embroidered on its velvet housings. His black mare, with her clean, small head and scarlet nostril, arched her foam-flecked neck, as she champed and fretted on a powerful bit, under the loose rein and light touch of her rider's hand. A cord of twisted tissue, striped like a serpent's skin, secured the hood of the Emir's burnouse; a sharp sabre hung, edge uppermost, at his belt. Save these, arms and ornaments he had none! Yet the Englishman, scanning that white draped figure on the good black mare, standing out from the array of Arab chivalry, apart and by itself, wondered no longer at the Emir's ascendency over his people, at their heroic and unreasoning devotion to one, in whom, like a second Mahomet, they believed, as warrior, priest, and king.

Soon the ten thousand horsemen formed in their respective tribes, and a chosen troop from each curveted into a smooth, green space before the Emir, and drew up in opposing bands. Then a chief on a chestnut stallion, thick and muscular, like one of the Elgin marbles, dashed out into the midst, and reined short up, man and horse quivering all over with suppressed energy and fire. Another, wheeling round him at a gallop, cast an unerring spear within a hand's-breadth of his turban; and the chestnut horse, springing to speed at a bound, dashed off in hot pursuit. A dozen strides and he had caught his enemy; the lance was up to strike, and so like fierce earnest was this warrior's play, it seemed as if it must transfix the fugitive. But no, a turn of wrist, a touch of heel, the chestnut skimmed aside like a swallow on the wing, and swooped at another foe, fresh emerged from the opposing phalanx. Another and another shot out to swell the game, and then a dozen, and then a score, till the whole were engaged, and the eye saw nothing but one wild whirl of streaming manes, and glancing steel, and floating draperies, and flash of pistols, through a cloud of dust; and here and there, above the dim confusion, the fragments of a shivered spear shot high into the air.

Then the dust rolled away. The skirmish subsided; chiefs were standing by panting steeds, stroking the pointed ears and dripping, shining necks of their favourites. Here

a girth had been broken, there a warrior rolled over, man and horse, on the sand: but beyond this, so skilful were the human, so well broken the animal performers, that nothing resembling a casualty had occurred. Abd-el-Kader bowed his head in dignified approval to the warlike Arab on the chestnut stallion, who galloped up to signify the conclusion of the sports by flinging down a broken lance at the Emir's feet. The play was over—the real drama was about to begin.

The chieftain signed to his lieutenants to attend him. All but one came cantering up and wheeled into their places on his flank. This last was he whom Abd-el-Kader most favoured and most trusted. He rode in slowly and steadily at a walk. Brooke was watching the Emir, and for an instant saw his dark eye dilate, but not another sign of discomposure betrayed itself either in the pale, calm face, or the stately, motionless figure. Not a sign, and yet in that instant Bou Maza levelled his pistol point-blank at the chieftain's heart: the next, his horse, the noblest in the desert, stumbled on that smooth, level surface, fell on his head and rolled completely over his rider, who lay confused and helpless, with the smoking pistol, which had gone off harmless, in his grasp.

The Englishman was the first down to catch the traitor by the throat, though his hand had hardly closed ere a score of sabres were flashing in the sun, a score of voices hoarse with rage dooming the fallen man to instant death; but the Emir's calm, cold tones rose above the angry Arab gutturals, as they had risen many a time, distinct and measured, above tap of drum, and roll of musketry, and swelling battle-cry of France, and the Emir's face looked upon the tumult pale, mild and peaceful, as though reposing in his harem, while he spoke.

"Harm him not!" said he, raising his voice slowly to command attention. "In the name of Allah, lift him up, give him back his arms, let his hands be free, and bring him here, that he may look upon my face and live!"

Bou Maza was a bold man, or he had hardly undertaken the crime which had thus been so strangely thwarted. He was an Arab, too, and could accept death with the strange composure that never seems to desert those fatalists when face to face with the inevitable; but his features worked with something keener than terror, and the foam was on his lip, while his black eyes sought the ground, and he shrank and cowered like a dog before the man whom he had just failed to murder.

"Bou Maza," said the Emir, in deep, quiet, sorrowful tones, "do you think I had not foreseen, and could not have prevented, your attempt on your chieftain's life? When you left the Council yesterday it was in your heart, that you would to-day murder your Father, as it was in mine that you would fail and be forgiven.

"Can you not see the hand of Allah, who caused your best horse to stumble and fall over a blade of tender grass, that you might not slay His prophet, whom He has destined to victory?

"Bou Maza, go in peace. Go to the enemies of your country and your faith. Tell them of your treachery—tell them of your failure. Tell them that Allah protects His prophet alike from the steel of a traitor as from the bullet of an open enemy. You shall have a free pass to their outposts. Take with you horse and arms, water and provisions. Go in peace, I say, and look upon my face no more!"

The Emir was as good as his word. Bou Maza was permitted to pass out of the camp, and proceed unmolested to his new friends, who received him with no great cordiality, as, indeed, he could hardly expect they should, after an attempt of so heinous a nature, which had, moreover, failed at the moment of execution.

Archie Brooke used often to declare that he had never thoroughly realised "chivalry" till he looked on the Emir's calm, noble face, while he extended pardon and protection to the traitor.

I am not writing Sir Archibald Brooke's biography. Another scene or two, and I have done. If circumstances help to form the character of the man, the man's nature again forces him into those situations which react upon it in their turn. An adventurer at thirty is an adventurer all his life. Brooke came back to England after Abd-el-Kader was taken prisoner. Nay, he even reappeared in St. James's Street, rode in the Park, went to the Derby, stayed a whole fortnight in town, was a little disappointed to find how many friends had forgotten him, and how the few whose memories were more tenacious had not missed him at all, and thought he was still in the Guards! The squire, too, his elder brother, had run up for the Great Race, leaving Mrs. Brooke in the country. "There was *another* coming," he said, with a laugh and deprecating shrug of the shoulders. "Archie would be with them directly the nurse was out of the house. Of course, his old room was always ready for him at Bridlemere." And Archie promised, and shook his brother cordially by

the hand; but long before the functionary alluded to had left the bedside of her pale, happy, lovely charge, he was battling with a sou'-wester in the Atlantic, steam against storm—the one power groaning, gasping, throbbing, quivering, yet wresting some two knots an hour from the headlong violence of the other—and ere the second boy was weaned, his uncle had already gained more than one success in South America, commanding a brigade of ruffians, in comparison with whom his old friends the Khabyles were perfect gentlemen and philanthropists.

Sir Archibald never liked to talk much of this stage of his career. I think he was a little ashamed of his cause and his comrades. He had joined them, too, in a moment of morbid and unworthy feeling. What right had he to discipline robbers, and point guns, and manœuvre manslaughter on a great scale, because the old dull pain at his heart still goaded him to action? Could he not drink his opiate, so to speak, but out of a human skull? He recrossed the Atlantic after a time, and went no more to England, but flitted through France into Eastern Europe, and set himself down for a brief resting space within an hour's ride of Bucharest, and took a farm on that rich Wallachian soil, and reaped one abundant harvest, and so departed to rove about aimlessly as before.

He lingered in Turkey for a while, as those do who are tired of European life and manners. And, indeed, so utterly are East and West at variance, that a man to tolerate either must be thoroughly disgusted with its converse. Sir Archibald liked the people: not the Greeks, but the bold, dominant Osmanli race. He appreciated their solemn courtesy, their grave, proud bearing, their truth, their hospitality, their courage, their generosity, their defiance of misfortune, their contempt for death—nay, he admired their intolerant pride of character and strict observance of religion; while he smiled to note the utter freedom which abroad, at least, they affected from the female yoke. He thought of settling in Turkey, and so thinking, watched those white sea-birds that flit to and fro across the surface of the Bosphorus, never resting wing or dipping plumage in the fair cool wave, and wondered whether he too was doomed to be a homeless wanderer in the world for evermore!

The leaven was working in him, you see, all this time. It drove him into action, and in action he found the anodyne which he was fain to accept for rest.

About this period, a little cloud like that in Holy Writ,

no bigger than a man's hand, appeared in Syria, above the chapel-roof that covers in the most sacred spot on earth. By and by it had spread over the whole heavens from east to west, and the Cossacks were gathering in the Ukraine, and the Royal Irish recruiting in Galway, and Omar Pasha was watching his overwhelming enemy on the Danube, with an army of brave men, half-starved, half-equipped, and wretchedly officered, save for a handful of adventurous Englishmen who had volunteered their services in the cause of the Sultan.

The Turkish general was sitting quietly on his horse, a little out of the line of fire from a Russian field-work, against which it was his intention to advance. Omar Pasha could feed an army, could manœuvre an army, and could fight an army. Moreover, he was gifted with that *coup d'œil* which distinguishes at once between the apparent and the real key to a position. He was muttering a few phrases of discontent in German, for it was already daylight, and a new redoubt, skilfully engineered, had sprung up in the night. The Russians must have laboured hard, and without intermission, for, though the work was low, it was carefully sloped and finished off, while the few guns it mounted commanded every approach to the chief earthwork it was constructed to protect.

"We *must* have it, Excellency!" exclaimed an English officer of Engineers, with a determined look on his comely red-bearded face. "It's well for us," he added, shutting his glasses, and pulling his horse's head up from the wet morning herbage, "that they could not put it fifty paces farther back. I can get a battalion along that ravine tolerably under cover till within pistol-shot. We must storm it then, and carry it with the bayonet!"

"Who is to lead them?" asked the general, mistrusting sadly an unwieldy Pasha for so dashing a business.

"Oh! Major Brooke will lead them, of course," answered the other. "It's just in his line. Excellency, we will have it in a quarter of an hour."

No more was said, but in ten minutes' time a battalion of blue coats and red fez caps was seen to disappear in a wooded hollow, under the command of an officer, strangely attired in high riding-boots, a plaid shooting-coat, and a low round hat, with a white cloth round it, carrying a sword by his side, and a formidable walking-stick in his hand. Whilst they seemed to be swallowed in the earth, a heavy well-sustained fire opened over the general's head against the

principal defence, and presently the blue coats and red caps emerged from the ravine in tolerable order, formed, wavered, hesitated, and finally disappeared again, leaving a figure, in riding-boots and plaid coat, wildly shouting, threatening and gesticulating on the bank.

The Engineer officer laughed, swore, and then laughed again. Omar Pasha shook his head, with a grim, sarcastic smile.

"It is a gallant Englander," he observed quietly, after a few moments of suspense, during which the figure descended, and reappeared from the ravine with some two or three score of bolder followers, whom it was urging on by much vigorous persuasion, and a few blows from the stick. Then, whirling that weapon round its head, it made a dash, apparently by itself, against the redoubt. But the spark had kindled now, the savage Turkish spirit flashed out and caught like wildfire. They swarmed like wasps from the ravine—they dashed, pell-mell against the earthwork; there was a loose, irregular volley, a wild, heart-stirring cheer, and when the cheer died out, and the smoke drifted heavily away, the crimson flag, with its glittering crescent, was waving from the parapet, and the slope beneath the outwork was dotted with blue prostrate figures, and white upturned faces, gleaming strange and ghastly in the morning sun.

"Well done, Brooke!" said the Engineer to himself, as he cantered off to hasten some poor bullocks bringing a gun up from the rear. "These Guardsmen turn out some d——d good officers! though where they learn their duty is more than I can tell"; and he shook his head gravely, as a man who concedes unwillingly a self-evident proposition. How Major Brooke's distinguished conduct affected the result of the action has nothing to do with my story, but when the Engineer asked him subsequently by what process he had acquired a knowledge of his profession in London, Brooke only laughed, and told him how the great Duke himself had testified to the difficulty of getting thirty thousand men into or out of Hyde Park.

Peace came within six months after the fall of the Russian stronghold, and Colonel Brooke (he was a colonel in the Turkish service now) thought of crossing into Asia, and visiting China by way of Tartary and Thibet—thought of emigrating to Australia—thought of tracing the Nile to its source — thought of exploring Central Africa, and — found himself in Paris. Here he was rather a lion, notwithstanding that lions were plenty for a little while; but he soon got tired

of it—soon began to find that city of glitter and whitewash, and perpetual motion and continual out-of-doors full-dress, and eternal drumming, dancing, dining, and standing about—was a waste, too, more dreary than a Mexican plateau, more toilsome than a rocky spur of Mount Atlas.

The French ladies wondered at him hugely. It was strange to find a man so cold, yet so self-possessed. Nothing shy, nothing awkward, nothing of the *type Anglaise* about him in speech or manner; pleasant, courteous, with a good deal of their own keen sense of humour, their tendency to sarcasm and repartee, but in all matters bordering on romance, or even flirtation, a stone, an impenetrable stone.

"C'est un ours vois tu, Clothilde?" said a pretty *marquise*, summing him up in confidence to a friend, whom she suspected of designs on this man of marble. "Un ours instruit, bien-entendu. Un ours qui a voyagé même, et qui fait toilette. Enfin, un ours qui ne danse pas, mais qui fait danser son monde!"

He had got sadly tired of Paris ere another recreation was provided for him in the last spot on earth at which an eruption was anticipated, in the country where England had been walking securely over a volcano for years, and started to find it burst forth over a score of kingdoms in a night. He saw an account of the Indian outbreak, in an English paper, sitting over his *absinthe*, at three o'clock, in the Rue Rivoli. By ten next morning he was at London Bridge; by seven that night he was leaving this station in the train for Calcutta direct, with his appointment and a pair of improved saddle-bags.

He was with Sir Colin at Lucknow, and reached Windham in time to take his part in the hard-fought defence of Cawnpore. Then came a severe wound, a raging, wasting fever, and he was down for weeks and weeks, feeble, prostrate, delirious, in that blighting atmosphere, and under that burning sun.

Archie Brooke rose, like many others, from a bed of suffering, having found out certain truths that do not strike men so keenly, in the saddle or the trenches, as on the stretcher of an hospital. He was a calmer, happier man after that weary period. The impatience, the restlessness, the craving for incessant action were gone, and only the quiet energy, and cool, good-humoured courage, which were a part of his very nature, remained. He had discovered, that for happiness, duty was a better substitute than excitement. Wherever he could be of service, he went; wherever he went,

he worked harder, more quietly, more unselfishly, than other people.

Time, or rather Mercy, had healed the great wound now—the great wound that had been first dealt by a beloved hand, and then torn open once again by the relentless grip of death. Twice had the pain been keener than he could bear; now there was left a dull, aching sense of void, but sorrow had given place to resignation—resignation was about to blossom into hope. Not the hope that is dependent on earthly uncertainties, and scarce deserves the name, but the sure and certain hope that already grasps confidently at the other world. He could have borne to go to England now. He caught himself often thinking of the cool English breezes, and the smiling English valleys, and the white thorn on the hedges, nay, the very buttercups in the May meadows, rich with green and gold. He longed to be at home just once again, were it only to see the grass waving tall and fresh over a beloved grave.

He was employed in the pacification of the Lebanon, a duty for which his familiarity with French arrangements and Eastern intrigue especially fitted him; and when that complicated business was concluded, came back after his long absence to be knighted by his Sovereign. If on his previous return to London, he had been surprised to find how few people recognised him, he might have been gratified now, at his first *levée*, with the curiosity evinced concerning the quiet, dark, war-worn man, with all those foreign orders on his breast, and amused at the answers of old schoolfellows at Eton, and companions afterwards in the world, who had quite forgotten him, and could not tell who he was. After he had seen his brother's children, and especially Helen, Sir Archibald completely abandoned an idea he had once formed, of taking service with his old employer, the Sultan, and remaining entirely abroad. The girl seemed to have found her way at once to her soldier-uncle's heart. She wondered, indeed, at the deep tenderness with which he would fix his eyes on her face, and why there should be a moisture in them sometimes, that was almost like tears; but with the instinct of her sex, Miss Brooke soon found out that her word was law with Uncle Archie, and she petted him, and appealed to him, and domineered over him, and ordered him about accordingly.

When Helen came out, it was Sir Archibald who arranged her presentation by the great Lady Waywarden herself; and I believe he bespoke (and paid for) the beautiful dress which

she wore, of which, as of her chaperon's, was there not an account, sublime and incomprehensible, in the *Morning Post*? When his niece rode in the Park, as ride she would, under a broiling sun, in the hottest part of the day; it was her uncle whom she commanded to take care of her, and whose horsemanship she was good enough to commend, for the Brookes, like many of our English families, were centaurs from the cradle; whom she paraded up and down at all places, untiring; and scolded if he ventured to complain of the heat.

"You, dear, of all people! Who have been in Africa and India. Absurd! Why, Uncle Archie, I call it de—lightful!"

The girl was immensely proud of him, quoting him, and adopting his opinions on most subjects with a facility truly feminine; and the pair had all sorts of private jokes and understandings between themselves, as indeed was to be expected, for in London they were inseparable: and if she wanted to be taken anywhere in the country, Sir Archibald would throw over every engagement, and come down at a moment's notice, to attend on his niece.

He lived in London now, very quietly and unostentatiously, therefore people believed him to be immensely rich, and, consequently, horribly stingy. That he was neither the one nor the other could have been substantiated by his banker, and a great many very poor people in some of the most squalid rookeries of the town. Society, with its usual discrimination, wondered what he would do with his money, and why he did not marry!

It seems that a bachelor is never safe, not even a bachelor with white moustaches and thirty years' campaigning over his head. There are, therefore, women to be found, I presume, who spare neither age nor grey hairs. How are we to distinguish them? Do they go about disguised like the others at dinner and evening parties, cool, shining, beautiful, and well-dressed? I often marvel at the men to whom these goddesses stoop so kindly; often try hard, and fail, to see what it is in Endymion, coarse, ill-mannered, awkward, and perhaps irritable, that draws Diana down from the lustrous regions where she reigns amongst her nymphs. Is it an attractive force on his part, or a spontaneous effort on hers? Is it a merciful pity for our sex, or a cordial dislike of her own?

Even at Sir Archibald's age, it is not always a waste of time to make love to an elderly gentleman; but after a career like his, an honest, stand-up battle with self, fought fairly out, and hardly won at last, it is like watering a sand-

bank in hopes of raising a crop. The labour is indeed absorbed quietly, gratefully, and to any extent, but there is no result from it whatever.

The *marquise* was right about Sir Archibald, after all. For women he was a bear with good manners; but a bear who had never broken his chain. There was yet a link or two left that the poor bear could not have found in his heart to part with. Other bears keep whole sets of rusty fetters hidden away in their dens—lockets, rings, gloves, flowers, efforts of embroidery, packets of faded yellow letters tied about with dingy ribbons, once so bright and new. Other bears even like sometimes to dwell upon their servitude, to talk of their capture, their teachers, their resistance, and the red-hot foothold on which they learned their steps. But this bear kept all such matters for his own reflection; and though he hugged the chain-links close to his bearish heart, they were very simple, harmless, and could have compromised nobody. They did but consist of a lock of hair, soft and dark like Helen's, in an envelope—no letter, nothing more, except that on the turned-down leaf of the envelope was written in a woman's hand—

"You will forgive me, I know. But I shall never forgive myself."

And now Uncle Archie had come joyously down to Bridlemere on purpose to take Helen to the Middlesworth ball.

CHAPTER X

THE MIDDLESWORTH BALL

THIS was no trifling ceremony, no commonplace, ordinary function. To the inhabitants of Middlesworth it partook of the nature of a sacrifice, entailing, as it did, vast preparation, anxiety, and expense. To the surrounding county families, although intrinsically a festivity, it was also an important epoch from which to date all other less engrossing events. As people say before and after Christmas, so those who attended it were accustomed to date their proceedings as before and after the Middlesworth ball. It was a movable feast, too, and depended, in a certain sense, and by courtesy, as it were, on the moon. She seldom smiled upon it, however, usually hiding herself the whole of the important night behind heavy clouds coming up from the south-west, with a drizzling rain.

Post-horses were in great request at this season, and their drivers expectant of large gratuities in virtue of the occasion, with the very questionable state of sobriety it produced; nor were carriage accidents and heart-breaking stoppages, both going and returning, by any means unusual incidents in the gathering. People abused it also, and never seemed sure they would go, though they always went. Papas said it interfered with hunting, which was simply untrue, for men cannot ride across country at night, and everybody can get up to *hunt* however late he goes to bed, as ladies very well know. Mammas thought they would catch cold, which was, indeed, a more plausible excuse, and borne out by subsequent indisposition; whilst the young ladies vowed it would be stupid, and they didn't care the least whether they were taken or not, having got their dresses ready all the time.

There seemed also a general anxiety to arrive as late as possible. How the Town Hall, which was a large room, ever filled, under this prevailing feeling, was probably known but to Tootle and Dinne, the celebrated musical firm, who, from their gallery overhead, dominated the ball, hatching, nursing,

tempering, and keeping it alive by their strains. They could have told you, and they alone, how large and stately and empty the apartment looked, when they first took their places, and the second fiddle commenced his excruciating practices for the attainment of harmony!—how beautifully the walls were decorated with stripes of chintz and festoons of flowers!—how wondrous was the execution of the Town Arms in chalk upon the floor!—how mellow the lustre of those wax-lights under which sallow women looked fair, and fair women lovely!—lastly, how the first arrivals kept cautiously in the doorway, shrinking from this enchanted region like a knot of bathing schoolboys hesitating on a river-brink in June!

They could have told you—better than I can—for they must have watched her oftener—how Mrs. George Stoney was usually amongst the earliest; how imperially she entered, spreading her robes of stiff and costly material about her, as she took up a position of defence, at what she was pleased to term her own end of the room; how her husband followed humbly, looking and feeling completely out of place, as a man must on such occasions whose gloves are too large, whose boots are too small, and whose general habits and disposition lead him to wish earnestly that he was in bed; how they were seldom accompanied, though generally followed at a later period, by Philip—far more in his element, and, for reasons of his own, regarding these gaieties as glimpses into Paradise; how, by degrees, more groups of beauty and muslin, and *tulle* and jewellery, arriving, more voices repeating the same formula—"What a night! Where are you staying? Whom did you bring?" and, "What a pity the room is so narrow!" the separate knots congregated into a crowd, and then dispersed suddenly in couples, while the band struck up, the centre of the apartment cleared itself as if by magic, the *vis-à-vis* were bespoken, the quadrilles arranged, and the ball fairly began.

The weather was cold, though not cold enough to stop hunting. Two or three adjoining packs of hounds had shown sport; the dancing men, exhilarated by their morning's amusement, were on the alert; the chaperons, congregating round the fire, already prophesied a good ball; nay, Mrs. Stoney herself whispered to George that the "stuck-up set seemed less stuck-up than usual, though, to be sure, Lady Waywarden hadn't come yet"; and everything looked promising for a success.

Philip was embarked in the intricacies of the Lancers

with a pretty, blue-eyed girl, who, in the short intervals permitted by that complicated dance, looked up at him from under her eyelashes, as some girls always do look up at their partners, with the benevolent object, no doubt, of making the whole thing as pleasant as possible. She could not but observe that his attention wandered visibly towards the door, "watching for Lady Waywarden's party, of course," thought the blue-eyed girl, and she cursed them by her gods. What I mean is, she said "Bother!" in her heart. Then the measure came to a close; he mollified her with tea; he returned her to her mother, and stood under the music free as air again, but still watching the door.

Just after the next dance (a glorious waltz, played a little too slow), a buzz of attention, almost of admiration, quivered through the room. Philip's heart jumped into his mouth, and sank down to his boots again. It was but Lady Waywarden's party, after all! The rest of the society, however, seemed to appreciate this addition to their ranks more favourably, although, to Mrs. Stoney's delight, her ladyship did not appear. She had dressed, indeed, for it, and sent her party from Tollesdale, but changed her own mind at the last moment. "The weather was hateful. It was a dark drive. The duchess could chaperon Julia. Waywarden would take care of them all. She didn't want to catch cold; and so good-night to you, dears, and a pleasant ball!"

Therefore, my lord came in with the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil by his side, and a frank, free, good-humoured, pleasant duchess she was! Fine face, Saxon to the chin, soft kind eyes, a rosy mouth, a ringing laugh, a French dressmaker, handsome, happy, and twenty-three! No wonder she was popular, no wonder the grandees crowded about her, and overwhelmed her with questions, and welcomes, and civilities, and congratulations on her looks, her dress, her dancing, everything that was hers!

"Where was the duke?" "Oh! Merthyr-Tydvil never turned up! He was hunting his hounds the other side of the county. Very likely fighting his way at this moment, poor fellow! on a tired horse, to Tollesdale. Very likely fast asleep in his own arm-chair at St. Barbs. So sorry he wasn't here! Had waited till the last moment in hopes he'd come. Merthyr-Tydvil was wild about dancing, and this seemed to be such a nice ball!" And the duchess, who, though she *was* a duchess, had married for love, and was as happy as a dairymaid, looked about so pleased, so pleasing, so kindly,

fresh, and radiant, that even Tootle and Dinne above fancied a dozen more wax-candles had been suddenly lighted, and struck up an enlivening measure with a keener taste and spirit than was usually displayed by those celebrated performers themselves. Nay, Mrs. George Stoney could not resist the pervading influence, and was actually fascinated by the duchess. The latter had no idea of confining her good spirits and her good-humour to any one part of the room. She asked her jovial host point-blank to dance with her. She made Waywarden take her to the low end, and invite that great handsome woman to be their *vis-à-vis*, owning, I am afraid, that she wanted to inspect so wonderful a dress more closely: nay, she trod upon the dress by accident, and apologised so sweetly, and spoke to Mrs. George subsequently in the tearoom so kindly, that the latter adored her on the spot, and was never afterwards tired of praising her favourite, paying her, as she thought, the greatest of all compliments, while she protested "she could not conceive it possible how such a sweet creature as that could be a friend of Lady Waywarden!"

And these victories her Grace effected without effort or afterthought, just as she transfixed Ragman de Rolle by a glance, literally dazzling that diffident hussar with her beauty, leaving him bewildered, awe-stricken, and positively gasping with admiration.

Philip Stoney had left off watching the door for perhaps five minutes, during which interval he had been pressed for a tea-drinking service by an old lady who had held him on her knee when a child. The little start he gave, and the rapidity with which the colour left his cheek, when he saw Sir Archibald and Miss Brooke at his very elbow, as he re-entered the ballroom, sufficiently accounted for his previous vigilance to anyone who happened to be watching him. Mrs. George did, and, being a woman, found him out from that moment.

Helen looked remarkably well; but she, too, was pale even for *her*. Nevertheless, as both her brothers remarked (for both were there), "everything had been done to bring her out in good form"; nor, indeed, could the most artful and experienced of dowagers in London have been more anxious than was Sir Archibald about the dress and appearance of his charge. It was this old soldier, whose life had been spent in camps and deserts, and long, weary campaigns, and fierce irregular warfare, who had suggested the dressing after dinner, the cup of strong coffee before starting, and the latest

departure possible, that she might appear with smooth hair and fresh toilet when the room was at its fullest.

How proud he was of her as she moved gracefully along, with her white wreath encircling the dainty head that she carried like a young stag, in happy contrast with its wealth of silken jet-black hair. Even Walter could not help whispering to Jack: "I must say, Nell always looks like a thorough-bred one"; and Jack replied from the bottom of his honest heart, "Darling Nell!" but Sir Archibald believed in her as the handsomest girl and the nicest that had been seen in England for twenty years, and doted on her and admired her more than did anybody else on earth, except one, who had been watching the door so eagerly to-night. That one could have kissed the very ground she trod on. *He* worshipped her as an angel, while Sir Archibald loved her as a child. To her uncle she was the embodiment of memory—to *him*, of hope.

Mr. Philip Stoney, I say, started when he saw her, as if he had not expected Miss Brooke, which seems strange, inasmuch as if this had been the case, I cannot satisfactorily account for his presence here at all.

I think I can understand also, though I cannot explain, why he made as though he had not noticed her, but collected his energies a little, and then walked up to perform his bow, rather distantly, doubting the while that he should hardly yet find courage to ask her to dance. But Helen looked so pleased to see him, and shook hands with him so cordially, that he brightened up all at once, and made his very natural proposal with far more audacity than he could have hoped, but in a low tone and a serious, notwithstanding, since it was no light boon to *him* for which he begged. I daresay Miss Brooke's quick ear did not fail to detect a little tremor in his voice, and she may even have suspected the reason why the strong arm fairly trembled under a hand that rested on it so lightly.

If so, it might have been displeasure, perhaps, which caused her to speak but little, and on commonplace topics, scarce louder than a whisper, and that prevented her lifting her own eyes more than once, and then very cautiously, to her partner's; nay, though her colour went and came, this is often the result of hatred as well as love. I know she looked Mr. Multiple straight enough in the face when she recognised the stranger whom she had seen in her afternoon's walk, and who presumed to bow to her on the strength of that fortuitous meeting. I also think she clung to Philip a little as she hurried away, leaving Sir Archibald and No. 6 standing together near the

door, from which position they reconnoitred, and remarked upon the different incidents that constituted the ball.

And now Ragman de Rolle, stimulated by the threefold influence of ambition, admiration, and champagne, implored Sir Archibald, whose acquaintance he had made through Walter, to present him to the young, happy, handsome duchess. Uncle Archie, who knew everybody, and, if a little satirical, was always good-natured, complied immediately, and Rags, emboldened by success, ventured to ask her to dance, trembling the while at his own audacity.

She was one of those straightforward, energetic ladies, who go to a ball for the express purpose of dancing, just as a sportsman beats a turnip-field to kill as many birds as he can. The more sport she had, the better she was pleased. I believe also, to use another metaphor of the same nature, she cared little about a partner's points, so long as he could "go."

"Very happy, I'm sure," said the duchess, with a cordial bow and a radiant smile that would have knocked even an experienced practitioner out of time, while she drew her arm through her partner's, and led him away at once in search of a *vis-à-vis*, for this was to be a quadrille, and she worked her dances regularly through, round and square.

The hussar scarcely knew whether he was on his head or his heels. He had a vague idea he was dreaming; the whole thing was too like enchantment to be true; but if ever man resolved to merit his good fortune by rigid attention to a figure and accurate execution of its steps, that man was Rags.

Though Mr. Multiple moved about the room, criticising freely its inmates, Uncle Archie, be sure, did not stir from his position near the door, for he had told Helen she would find him there when required; but he watched the dancers with the indolent enjoyment of a man who has begun to rest himself in life. Even Sir Archibald was somewhat given to dreaming—a habit he had acquired in many still night-watches and lonely wanderings. He had read a little, and thought much. His reading had been quaint, desultory, and somewhat useless; his thoughts were imbued with a tinge of romance and melancholy and humour combined, which afforded him a good deal of quiet amusement. From where he stood he could see nothing of Helen but the ample skirt of her garment, so he watched the duchess, and admired her fresh English beauty, her frankness, her comeliness, her fair modest brow, her native dignity of manner, and the robe of truth and innocence and simple high-born grace in which she moved so royally. He

thought of her noble, free-hearted young husband, whom she loved so fondly, and the brave old race to which she had brought the blood and beauty of her own. The brave old race that had given its scions so lavishly for England, wherever shot was fired or sword drawn, or life poured out like water in the cause of honour, and the knightly craving for renown; that had seen its children stand at Inkerman, and charge at Waterloo, and walk gracefully to death at Malplaquet, and shiver lances on the mail-clad chivalry of France, to the battle-cry of "St. George!" at Creçy and Poictiers; that traced its lineage upward, loyal and stainless, to the Saxon Heptarchy; to the good King Alfred, even to the dim distant glories of Arthur and his Round Table, with the princely paladins, amongst whom one of the knightliest and the noblest was its own ancestor, Sir Carodac the Keen.[1]

Still looking at the duchess as she moved through the dance, he thought of *The Boy and the Mantle*; of the first gentle heart on record that had given itself to a Craddock; of its faith, its loyalty, its honest unshrinking confidence in its own truth and purity, when it assumed the enchanted garment that none could wear if false, however beautiful, as described in the simple stanzas of that quaint old ballad—

When shee had tane the mantle
And cast it her abowt,
Upp att her great toe
It began to crinkle and crowt.
Shee said, Bowe downe, mantle,
And shame me not for nought.

Once I did amisse,
I tell you certainlye,
When I kis't Craddocke's mouth
Under a greene tree—
When I kissed Craddocke's mouth
Before he marryed mee.

A strange, old-world ballad! Strange thoughts for a ball-room! Sir Archibald had almost forgotten where he was, when a voice that never failed to fix his attention roused him

[1] Why should I mention many more—
Sir Kaye, Sir Banier, and Sir Bore,
Sir Carodac the Keen;
The gentle Gawain's courteous lore,
Hector de Mares and Pellinore,
And Lancelot, who evermore
Looked stolen wise on the Queen?
Bridal of Triermain.

from his dream, and Helen murmured in the fond, petulant tone that she used only to him—

"Oh, Uncle Archie, I've promised to dance the next dance with that horrid man, and it's a waltz!"

"That horrid man" was no other than Mr. Multiple, who, considering his previous meeting with Miss Brooke, and acquaintance with her uncle and second brother (for Walter knew him, of course), entitled him to make the request, had offered himself as a partner, and whom Helen, too young a lady to be rude, was forced to accept, though much against the grain.

She gave a comical little look of resignation at her uncle when Mr. Multiple came to claim her, and darted one glance, which was immediately withdrawn, at another face far down the room. Then the waltz began, and there was nothing for it but to rest her hand upon Mr. Multiple's shoulder, and put off into the whirlpool under his pilotage.

Had Sir Archibald not been so taken up with his favourite as to have eyes for none but her, he must have remarked a charming couple, in whom he was to a certain degree interested, floating airily round to the sinking, swelling strains of the soft *Nachtwändler* waltz. Lady Julia Treadwell was one of those damsels who can never be thoroughly eclipsed. Less splendid than the duchess, less lovely than Helen Brooke, she was, if possible, better dressed than either, and triumphed, besides, in a brightness and piquancy peculiarly her own. She danced, too, like a sprite, or a Frenchwoman, and never seemed hot or out of breath, whereas the duchess, in the ardour of her exercise, did pant a little more than was correct, and flush a little more than was becoming. She had the knack, too, of talking to her partner the whole time, on indifferent subjects, tinged with a strong dash of sarcasm. She seemed to many lookers-on, of whom Jack Brooke was one, to be discussing some engrossing topic in keeping with the general fascination of the scene. What she *did* say was simple and practical enough. You must imagine the partners whirling by, smooth and speedy as an express train, the lady going with perfect ease, and, as she observed, "quite within herself."

Lady Julia—

"Good waltz that old one, Mr. Brooke. They don't half put the pace in, though!"

Walter, who, though an excellent dancer, was doing all he knew—

"I can make it a little faster, if you like."

Lady Julia, looking about her as coolly as if she were standing still—

"Wait till that red woman collapses, and we'll get the steam on. Down the whole length of the room, like the run-in for the Derby.—Ah! I *like* this!"

So down the whole length of the room they came with the utmost haste, for the red woman, who was, indeed, no other than Mrs. George Stoney, collapsed from sheer exhaustion, after a round or two, and Lady Julia, having a clear stage, took advantage of it to whirl along with a dexterous rapidity that elicited this exclamation of enjoyment when she stopped, which she did immediately under Jack Brooke's nose.

He made her a solemn bow, as politeness required, and she returned it with a little, saucy nod, half malicious, half defiant, that frightened honest Jack considerably. Then she bent towards her partner, and asked him where he learned to waltz. "You can go fast without labouring," said she. "Is it natural genius or polite education? You must have begun very early. Did the *deux-temps*, in a pinafore, with your sister, I should say?"

Walter "didn't know, he was sure. Always waltzed; ever since he could remember. Supposed he must have learnt once. Taught it by his wet-nurse, in all probability!"

"Don't your brother waltz?" asked Lady Julia quickly; and, turning sharp round upon Jack, repeated her question: "Don't you waltz, Mr. Brooke?"

But before he could answer, which he must have done in the negative, she was away on her flight once more, her pliant figure swaying gracefully to every movement of her cavalier, her draperies floating about her in a mist of lace and muslin, and a gossamer material which, I understand, is called, with great propriety, *illusion*, her eyes shooting sparks like diamonds, and the uncompromising mouth shut tighter than before. She looked like a very resolute Ariel, bound on some mission not exclusively of charity or goodwill.

Jack watched her for two or three rounds of the room with much the same expression that a child wears staring at a soap-bubble. He was wishing, perhaps, that he could waltz as well as Walter; was thinking that he had spent too much time in the study of equitation, self-defence, boat-racing, and professional bowling, to the neglect of those lighter accomplishments which are patronised by the female sex. What did they care—what did *she* care for the exact feather of an oar, the scientific defence of a wicket, the cross-counter that

staggered a prizefighter, or the set-to that landed a steeplechase? Like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, he regretted that he had not devoted to the tongues, and such polite acquirements, the hours he had wasted in these rude, robust pursuits.

He watched Lady Julia, I say, as a child watches a soap-bubble, and on his honest countenance came the blank look of the child when the soap-bubble bursts, while he turned away, and walked drearily off to the supper-room to refresh himself with a draught of the Plantagenet Arms champagne.

Physically speaking, this was by no means a wise measure —that beverage, like a good deal of ball-supper champagne, being of a kind which inflicts headache more or less acute, and a hot sensation at the back of the drinker's throat next morning. Nevertheless, he found Rags here, in a state of high triumph and jubilation, tossing off the pernicious mixture in frothy bumpers, and holding Philip Stoney by his button-hole the while, in ignorance or defiance of that gentleman's obvious anxiety to escape.

Rags was pleased with himself, and consequently pleased with everything else, even the Plantagenet Arms champagne. He had made, as he felt, a bold plunge into high life. Henceforth, Rags believed, he was what French people call *lancé*. He had not tried the great world yet. He began to think he should like it. With a few hints from Walter Brooke, he did not see why he should get on worse than other people. This was a famous start. He should not dance again; of course not. After the duchess, every other partner would be tame and insipid. Not that he meant to cultivate her Grace's acquaintance any more that night. Though delightful, the process had entailed a high state of nervous tension. He had done enough, he thought, for once, and had earned the right to enjoy himself. So Rags leaned across the supper-table, and held his champagne-glass to be filled again and again.

"Have some more, Brooke," said he, as Jack set his goblet down with no great approval of its contents. "And you too, Stoney. Why you've had none yet, man! You, sir, here! Three clean glasses and a fresh bottle of champagne! Good ball, Brooke. Capital ball! By Jove, sir, the thing's been remarkably well done to-night! I never saw a better-looking lot of women in a room, and some of the London ones too, as I was telling Stoney, just now. There's the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil—your uncle introduced me. Isn't she just a ripper! I say, I've been dancing with her!"

Jack cheerfully conceded that the duchess was a ripper, not attaching, perhaps, to that epithet the full sense of sublimity in which it was used, as I have my doubts whether he considered her quite the handsomest person in the room, and Rags, filling for himself and his friends, proceeded with great earnestness—

"Lady Julia's not what I call an everyday one; is she, Brooke? Can't she just dance? And such an easy goer, too, with it all. I say, old boy, your brother Walter seems making the pace pretty good there, eh? Walter don't often come out like this! I never saw him so fit as he is to-night. He's a brother officer of mine, you know—Walter—and the greatest friend I have. There's nothing I wouldn't do for Walter. Here's his good health!"

Perhaps Jack may have thought that it would be no uncongenial task to make running in so pleasant a race, and that a man deserved but little credit for being fit, as Rags called it (by which term this gentleman understood the most advantageous state possible both of mind and body), whilst speeding through the enchanted maze, with that wicked Ariel, whom mortals and the Peerage called, by courtesy, Lady Julia Treadwell; but Jack was a man of few words at any time, and little inclined to be loquacious now, so he contented himself with a sigh and another mouthful of the execrable champagne.

Philip Stoney was silently watching the dancers through the door of the supper-room.

Rags proceeded with his reflections on things in general, and women in particular—

"I haven't forgotten your sister, Brooke; though you can't well tell a fellow how deucedly you admire his sister to his face! She looks like a queen; that's what *she* does. And dresses like one, too. Devilish odd if Walter Brooke's sister didn't dress well. You know she's Walter's sister as well as yours, old boy! I say, Brooke, you must introduce me to your sister. Not to-night, though. Hang it! I shan't go near the dancers any more to-night. I've had *my* fun, you know, and a skinful of this stuff, and now I shall smoke a quiet weed, you know, before turning in. Will you have a quiet weed, Brooke? I can give you a very good one. Holloa! Here she comes, dancing with the chap that's staying in the hotel. Don't like that chap. Don't know him, but don't like him. Where does he hang out? Who the devil is he?"

Though Rags was somewhat voluble, having his tongue

loosened by the stimulants he had applied, there was yet a certain perceptive faculty glimmering through the fumes of champagne which enabled him to observe annoyance and something like anger in Miss Brooke's countenance as she entered the supper-room, now nearly deserted, on Mr. Multiple's arm. He was whispering to her earnestly, and with a smile that did not improve his beauty. Her head was erect, and held as far from him as the situation permitted. It was obvious she did not like her company; and catching sight of her brother Jack, she made a movement towards him at once, releasing her partner's arm, with a cold, disdainful bow, that denoted displeasure and dismissal.

Unfortunately, at this moment, Rags, whose legs were more affected by his potations than his head, and who, while he retained his sense of propriety, had great difficulty in preserving his perpendicular, made such a lurch from the table that had it not been for Jack's assistance he must have fallen then and there. Such a lurch, indeed, as only needed his further explanation of its cause—namely, that he had caught the spurs, which, being out of uniform, he did *not* wear—to indicate that Rags had better be got to bed as soon as convenient. Jack good-naturedly helped him out by a side-door, covering his retreat with his own broad shoulders, and saw him safe into a fly that could be trusted to take him home to barracks.

There were but three people left in the supper-room. Helen, standing alone, blushing painfully with embarrassment and annoyance; Mr. Multiple stepping forward to resume his attentions; and Philip Stoney, with his lip twitching, and the eager look on his face that it used to wear when he kept the wickets for Middlesworth in their great matches against Mudbury.

He had tact enough, though, for a whole Eleven, and that is a quality, I think, which is more successful with women than either courage or intellect, though, perhaps, it seldom exists without a leavening of both.

"This is our quadrille, I think, Miss Brooke," said he, with as cool, matter-of-fact an air as if it had been so arranged for a fortnight, and the second figure of the dance had not already commenced. Then he walked her quietly back into the ball-room, without fuss or ceremony, thus extricating her from the false position in which she was left by her brother's sudden departure in charge of Rags.

What a number of ways there are of saying "Thank you!" When it is murmured by a soft kind voice that is, to your ear

the one voice of woman upon earth ; when a gentle head leans towards you, breathing fragrance in your face; when a loved hand rests on your arm heavier than it has ever rested before, and the figure that haunts you in your dreams clings closer, as if for comfort and protection ; then, I think, those two little words, however low they are spoken, carry with them as much of tenderness and gratitude and appeal as it is in the power of language to convey.

Probably, Philip Stoney was of my opinion, for although it was too late to join the dancers, he did not at once conduct his charge back to Sir Archibald, who was waiting for her faithfully at his post. On the contrary, he led her into a sort of passage-room adjoining the receptacle for the ladies' cloaks, much affected at times as a resting-place and refrigerator by tired and heated damsels, but now, in consequence of a popular set of quadrilles and a waning assemblage, left unoccupied. Here Philip set a chair for the lady, with the utmost deference ; and not before she had got her fan well at work did he venture an apology for his forwardness.

"I saw you were tired, Miss Brooke," said he, affecting an air of unconcern, "and I thought you would like to sit down. There is not a chair in either of the other rooms. I hope," he added, looking away from her, and obviously not knowing exactly what he said, "I hope you are rested now."

Helen smiled. The inference was an ungallant one, and this unconscious, honest wooer was so different from Mr. Multiple.

"Not yet," she answered kindly. "Not till I have thanked you again, Mr. Stoney, for your thoughtfulness. Indeed"—the fan was going very fast now—"indeed, you never seem to care for any trouble or inconvenience, if it is to oblige me."

"There is nothing I would not give, or do, or suffer, for your sake," replied Philip, off his guard at last. "Miss Brooke"—he continued, in a choking voice, but stopped short, for she had turned very pale, and the voice was not like hers, in which she stammered—

"No! Oh no! I think I will go back to Uncle Archie now, Mr. Stoney, please; but thank you all the same."

He might have been a little hurt, for he offered her his arm immediately.

"Forgive me," said he. "I have monopolised you too long. You want to join the dancers!"

"I shall not dance any more to-night," said Helen, demurely enough, as Sir Archibald thought, for the pair had almost reached him when she made this austere declaration ;

but I imagine there was some mysterious inflection of voice, some passing expression of countenance by which it was accompanied, that gave it an import of a consoling and exhilarating tendency, for Philip's face brightened up on the spot, and he handed her over cheerfully to Sir Archibald, wishing "good-night" quite merrily, and disappearing in the crowd with the brisk energy of step and manner that was habitual to him.

Helen did not dance again, and it was odd enough that Philip's sister-in-law could not prevail on him, either by entreaty or ridicule, to pair off with any one of the many young ladies whom she delighted to scold, suit with partners, and generally *matronise* at the Middlesworth ball.

It did happen, though by a fortuitous concourse of circumstances truly remarkable, that he was in the street at the exact moment when Helen got into her carriage, after being carefully and skilfully shawled by Uncle Archie, to the disgust of No. 6, not yet retired to that dormitory, as wishing to see the last of Miss Brooke. It did happen also that she wished him "*good*-night!" again. Two very simple words—an exceedingly conventional valediction to leave a man so happy as Mr. Stoney looked when she turned away.

I do not know what he saw before him to make him walk so erect, so hopeful, so defiant. At a turn in the next street, however, he thrust his hat down on his head, buttoned his coat, and started off like a madman in the direction of the brewery.

Helen and her uncle jumbled over the rough pavement in the old family coach. She "liked her ball, uncle. Oh yes! So much! and all the more, dear, with such a cross old chaperon!" but she was unusually silent, and did not launch forth into any of the usual feminine praises of other ladies' charms, and invectives against other ladies' dresses. Nay, when they passed the barracks, and heard the trumpets sounding the alarm, and the men turning out by scores for fatigue-duty; though the *alerte* roused the old soldier, Helen hardly noticed it; and when her uncle bade her look through the carriage window at an ominous red light wavering across the sky, anticipating the dawn, it seemed to her but a dim, confused halo, all blurred and flickering, for she saw it through a mist of tears.

CHAPTER XI

A BREAK-UP

PERHAPS a fire and a shipwreck are the two scenes of destruction that impress on man's mind most forcibly his own impotency as compared with the elements. The latter of these catastrophes is, indeed, awful during its progress; but when its work is accomplished, not a vestige is left of the ruin that has been effected. The good ship has been broken up; and in a few hours, spars and timbers have been scattered far and wide, while her hull sinks, fathom by fathom, slowly down into the calm mysterious regions of the great deep. Perhaps a summer morning rises smiling and peaceful on a fatal night, and the sea hides all her secrets under a fair, tranquil bosom, scarcely heaving now from the storm of passions that surged up yesterday so merciless and uncontrolled. She has raged and is comforted. She has destroyed and is appeased.

But with a fire it is otherwise. Grand in its resistless fury while it conquers, it is grander still in its mighty desolation when it has triumphed and died out. There was something glorious and spirit-stirring, though frightful, in the roaring blast, in the ragged jets of flame spouting towards the sky, in the great luminous caverns of crimson and yellow, with their beams and wood-work traced distinct against the glare; in the crash of falling masonry, the clouds of lurid smoke and storms of fiery showers driven through the darkness; but when all this pageantry has sunk and fallen through; when night has passed away; when the cold dawn steals up to discover charred timbers, blackened cornices, jagged walls with strips of shrivelled paper clinging here and there like weeds upon a ruin, household fragments all distorted and defaced; nay, sadder sights than these: the blank space floored with ashes now, that was yesterday a pile of building, and a home: then it is we admit the grandeur of a scene thus dignified by desolation, and bow before the grim and dreary majesty of the destroyer who has passed away.

A BREAK-UP

Where the brewery of Stoney Brothers had stood the day before, the most imposing building, the most flourishing concern in the town of Middlesworth, a still November noon smiled upon a wide waste of smouldering, cinder-covered heaps, with here and there a thin white line of smoke rising peacefully into the air. All had been done that could be done. The discipline of the Dancing Hussars, acting on the energy and goodwill of the townsfolk, had, indeed, saved a few waifs and strays from the general destruction. Only two of the grey horses had been burned. One of these, stupefied, and fascinated as it were by terror, could not be induced to move ; and the other, extricated with difficulty, reared, plunged, neighed, broke loose, and trotted back to perish with his friend. Rags, who had turned out with his troop, shaking off the fumes of the champagne easily enough when there was a necessity for exertion, gave it as his opinion in the mess-room at breakfast, that "It was the best grill he ever had the pleasure of attending," and the simple townsfolk wandered round the ruins with solemn, awe-struck faces, asking foolish questions, and hazarding the most improbable surmises as to the origin of the fire. The children, too, congregating as town-children do, like sparrows, from the very gutters and housetops, had begun to play about the ruins before they were cold. The muffatee-makers made the catastrophe an excuse for additional potations ; the country-folks stared and grinned, and these, too, wondered "how it came about." Nobody seemed to think of Stoney Brothers, holding their business consultation, a couple of ruined men, in the dining-room at the comfortable villa.

How changed since the night they all sat so cosily round the fire, and speculated on a future that was now impossible, and enterprises that must henceforth be abandoned for ever!

It was no common loss they had suffered, no blow they had sustained, from which to recover and rise up with hope and energy increased by the very obstacles they had to overcome. It was rather a mortal wound, draining the very tide of life away from their prostrate bodies—a wound it was useless to bear, and impossible to cure.

George Stoney, crossing his arms on the back of his chair, buried his face in them, and sat silent, not moody—far less impatient—only utterly and completely broken down. Always subject to despondency, inclined to take an unpromising view of matters, both present and future, he blamed himself for not having foreseen, even though he could not prevent, the catastrophe. He blamed himself for having embarked so

large a capital on a venture in which the risks were proportionate to the profits; above all, he blamed himself bitterly that he had listened to his brother's persuasions, and delayed the insurance of his new building till it was too late.

But he never hinted to Philip by word or gesture that he attributed their ruin to his counsels. Quiet and indolent as was his disposition, timid and devoid of enterprise, he was a kindly man and a generous. Poverty might enter their household, but disunion never. He was not utterly penniless, for Mrs. George had a small income, enough to ward off absolute want, settled on herself; but he had lost position, capital, business, future: above all, that which could never be recovered, the labour of his prime. Nothing could give him back that score of years which had made Stoney Brothers the firm it was.

And this is the difference between being knocked down at twenty and at forty. You may be firmer on your legs at the latter age, and it takes a heavier blow to do your business, but you cannot get up again like the young Antæus, who rises from his mother-earth the stronger and the fresher for his fall.

Its elasticity seems to me the one distinctive quality of youth. Hope is still in the bottom of the box. It is only after repeated shakings, and when the tenement is a good deal shattered, that she fairly takes to her wings and flies away. But she never comes back again. You do not try to mend the box any more, and she will have nothing to say to a man whose tools are lying useless at his feet.

George sat with his face buried in his arms, and never moved save to look at his brother with a wan, weary smile, intended to signify confidence and goodwill.

The latter remained at a writing-table in the corner of the room, despatching the necessary letters to agents and correspondents, with as much energy and clearness of head as if they had commenced some fortunate speculation, rather than this lamentable and irretrievable disaster. Some of the books had been saved, though the new counting-house was burned to the ground; and these, tumbled, dirtied, many of them scorched and half-destroyed, lay about his chair. It was obvious, that for hours to come, Philip would have no time for despondency. And yet, though he could write with a steady hand, and an unclouded brow, his was by far the heavier heart of the two. His own griefs, his own ruin, the destruction at one swoop of all his hopes (and no one but himself knew how fair those hopes had blossomed only last

night), were swamped in his feelings of stinging reproach about the insurance. It was maddening to know that he had sacrificed the whole business to a saving of one paltry quarter's payment. He would not think of it. He worked with an energy almost savage, to have no time for reflection, and while he worked, a pang, that was like physical pain, shot across him, as he remembered the difference between yesterday and to-day.

Yet he wondered, too, and blamed himself, that he was not more miserable; that the gleam from a pair of dark eyes shed on him last night should still have power, notwithstanding all that had passed since, to brighten the gloom of his lot, and that the glory should not have entirely departed, though the angel had left him hours ago.

There is a proverb in daily use amongst old women, of both sexes, affording them, as it would seem, much solace for the troubles of their juniors, to the effect that the course of true love never yet ran smooth. I know not why this superstition of the heart should be more engrossing when tossing down the mountain torrent, than when floating calmly on the surface of a mild canal. I see no reason for desire, simply because its object is out of reach. A Dutchman, for instance, making love over his pipe in his summer-house to his cousin, whom he is intended by both families to marry, ought to be capable of as warm and tender an affection as the Montague to whom it is certain death to woo one of the house of Capulet. Yet I doubt if the kiss of prosperous and plighted love is ever pressed so longingly, so closely, as the wild, hopeless caress that seals an eternal farewell for lips which never should have met, and parting now, must drink their bitter punishment—and never smile, except in mockery, again. The wound is too deep for balm; the pain too keen for tears; and yet—and yet—would they have had it otherwise if they could?

It is a dangerous example to follow that of

> The Squyer of lowe degree,
> Who loved the King's daughter of Hongarye,

seldom guiding its imitators to a happy termination.

The "Squyer's" life and best energies are usually wasted in the process; and the Princess, though she wears a calmer brow, and neither neglects her headgear, nor her manners, nor the duties of her station, carries an aching heart with her, unsuspected, to the grave.

But both have learned the great lesson of humanity, cheap

at any cost of suffering or despair: the great lesson of self-sacrifice, which is the soul's training for immortality.

Now Philip Stoney had, no doubt, set his wishes on a prize which hung a good way farther up the ladder than he could expect to climb. Nevertheless, it was hard to see the rungs break just as he got his feet upon them. I make no secret of his love for Miss Brooke—a love which, at the best of times, he considered foolish and presumptuous, so to be cherished accordingly; which was now utterly hopeless, and, therefore, hugged closer than ever to his heart.

Into Miss Brooke's sentiments I have neither the wish nor the power to penetrate. Ladies are accomplished hypocrites from the cradle, and possess, moreover, an idiosyncrasy which defies speculation. If people habitually avoid what they wish, consider Yes and No convertible terms, and delight in bathing one foot only at a time in the Rubicon, drawing back obstinately when there is no safety but in passing over; doing these things, observe, only not so invariably as might establish a rule of contrary by which to predict their conduct, it is obvious that on such natures argument by analogy is thrown away, and that no series of previous observation, no system of inductive reasoning, can afford the slightest clue to a labyrinth in which the paths are devious, eccentric, and, to all appearance, wholly aimless and unaccountable.

Philip then sat immersed in books and calculations. The thing was to be faced; liabilities must be met; a settlement, however fractional, should be at once promised; and payment of twenty shillings in the pound eventually worked out.

George still buried his head in his hands: if he lifted his eyes, it was but to stare vacantly at the fire, and sink down again more listlessly than before.

Presently a patter of feet was heard on the stairs, finishing in a bound that cleared the three last steps, and shook the whole house; then the small body from which this vibration proceeded, rattled the handle of the door with much impatience, and rushing in, leaped to George Stoney's neck with a merry laugh that brought warmth and consolation even to the heart of a ruined man.

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed Dot, settling herself comfortably, with her knees in the pit of his stomach, "if you could have seen Jane running after me to the nursery, and I hid behind the door, and Jane looked under the bed, and in our cupboard, and found my Noah's Ark, and said, 'Miss Dot, you naughty, *naughty* child, wherever have you got to?' and I ran out again like puss in the corner, and Jane couldn't catch me,

and I came down as quick as ever I could to play with you and Uncle Phil, for a little ; and I'll be quiet, now, papa dear, because you've got a headache"; and so concluded her breathless string of sentences, by squeezing his nose flat against her own in a tight and merciless embrace.

Mrs. George had a woman's tact in some things, notwithstanding her violent dresses, and her feud with Lady Waywarden. She had sent the child down first, because her instincts told her that an appeal to his protection would most readily arouse her husband from his apathy ; that the sight of Miss Dot, with her sunny curls, and her merry eyes, would remind him far more forcibly than any reasoning she could urge, that he had not lost all yet ; that there was something still left for which it was a duty to labour, and a pleasure to live. She followed her child almost immediately, and laid her hand upon her husband's shoulder, glancing towards Philip, working sternly in his corner, with an approving smile, ere she began her process of consolation in her own way, and in her loftiest vein.

I need scarcely observe that, on being informed of the catastrophe, her first impulse was to blame somebody ; and it was a good thing now that Stoney Brothers had established a wholesome rule of discussing business matters in business places. If they should happen to touch upon "the shop" over their wine, they never brought it with them across the threshold of the drawing-room in to tea. It is only by strict adherence to this practice that men can ensure necessary repose and a healthy change of thought in the bosom of their families. Mrs. George, therefore, had no clue whatever to the origin of the fire, and was utterly in the dark concerning the delay in effecting an insurance ; but what she did know was, that the town engine had been thirty-five minutes in getting under weigh for the scene of action, and when it arrived, had about as much effect in subduing the flames as might have been expected from the squirt she kept for the amusement of her children upstairs. Its inefficiency was therefore a fertile theme on which to descant ; and Mrs. George, not the least hampered by an unweaned baby, which she carried in the usual place, descanted on it accordingly.

" I'm sure," said she, gleaning her consolations, and tying them up, as it were, into a sheaf, while she went along, " I'm sure, George, it's only providential that it wasn't here, and us, you know, at the ball, and Jane such a heavy sleeper, and cook gone to see her aunt. Why, the children would have been

burned in their beds. If it hadn't been for the extraordinary inefficiency of our fire-engine—and I remember, George, the very words I used when we saw it, last June twelvemonth, locked up behind the gaol, and the key two miles off, at the police station; and Philip said I was quite right, didn't you, Philip? I say, that if our Town Council did its duty, they'd have got the fire under by daybreak; and if it had been here, a mile and a quarter farther, George, and uphill all the way, I do believe it wouldn't have reached us till there wasn't a stick standing, and we should have been without a rag to cover us, or a bed to lie upon. It's a mercy, and a providence, I declare, George, and we ought really to be thankful that it's no worse!"

George looked up wistfully, drawing his hand through Dot's pendent curls—

"Worse, Bella!" said he; "a man can't well be worse than ruined, can he?"

But Bella was not to be so put down. Shifting the baby to an unexhausted posture with the facility of constant practice, she bade Dot, who had not moved, sharply to "be quiet," and replied with dignity—

"No man is ruined, George, who retains his good name, and his respectability, and his station, and who has married into a genteel family, as you have done. My dear old man," she added, suddenly coming down off her stilts, and with her unoccupied hand pressing his head to the unoccupied part of her bosom, "how *can* you be ruined when you've got me, and Dot, and baby here, and the children, and Philip—our dear, good Philip, who works harder than all the rest of us put together?"

Philip heard, but made as though he heard not, bending fiercely over a ledger, so that none should see his face. He had sustained a bitter twinge or two this morning already, but none hurt worse than this. Perhaps Dot suspected something of the kind, for she slid down from papa's lap, and went to Uncle Phil, standing close behind his chair, perfectly quiet, and with rather a puzzled face, neither springing to his knee, nor making painful plunges at his whiskers, as was her wont. If she was surprised or hurt that he took no notice of her, she never showed it. Children seem to know instinctively when things are going wrong, and in perceptive power Miss Dot was no whit behind her neighbours.

George Stoney took heart of grace when he looked at his wife's happy, handsome countenance. She was the master-spirit, and he knew it. So did she, of course. It dawned

upon him that if Bella thought matters were not irremediable, why, things might not be so bad after all. Bella was shrewd. Bella was cautious. Bella must know best. Perhaps they might be tolerably comfortable still. Then he remembered that although his wife's income would keep him and his children from absolute hunger, Philip had not a shilling left in the world. He leant his head down, and groaned in weariness of spirit once more.

But Bella seemed to read his thoughts, and to have reflected on this contingency as well.

"I remember when I was at school, George, and though Dot does grow fast, it's not so long ago, we used to have a fable to turn into French, about a man and a bundle of sticks. I never forget what I've once learned, George; indeed, I think my memory is better than yours or Philip's. I don't call to mind, at this moment, what the French is for a bundle, but that's immaterial (Dot, don't tease your uncle!). Now I remember perfectly well that the man couldn't break the sticks till he untied the bundle, and snapped them one by one. George, dear, we're only a bundle of sticks now, and we must keep ourselves tied up. Philip must live with us, as he's always done. Why, Dot there would break her little heart without her uncle, though I must say I think he spoils her most injudiciously, and that's the truth!"

Mrs. George finished with a triumphant wave of the baby's whole body, that did not, however, the least interfere with its occupation; it was still combining the gratification of appetite with the comfort of repose. Philip raised his head from a half-consumed ledger—

"Bella," said he, "you're the best woman, and the most generous in the world. But what you offer is impossible. I must fight my own way now, till better times come round. I must leave you all, dear, kind as you are to me—George and you, and the children and Dot."

He bent his head over his work again very resolutely, and Dot, who understood him pretty well, and did by no means approve of the arrangement, made up her face for a howl.

This performance must have roused the baby, who would doubtless have shared in the concert, but fortunately Jane tapped at the door, and, entering immediately, quelled the coming outbreak with her presence and authority.

"If you please, ma'am," gasped that decorous person, whose composure late events had completely destroyed, "there's a old woman on the stairs as says she must see you or master, and is cryin' dreadful. She says she have a son

employed in the business, and he were at the brewery, she know, last night, and she have never set eyes on him since; but she have been lookin' for him all this mornin', here, there, and everywhere; and oh, ma'am!" added Jane, fairly breaking down on her own account, "it's awful to think that perhaps he may be nowheres after all!"

"Bring in some wine," said Mrs. George composedly, for she had a firm feminine faith in stimulants under every disorder of body or mind, "and tell her to come here directly. Poor old thing! I daresay she's frightened out of her life about nothing, and only wants a little sensible advice to set her right."

George groaned at this unlooked-for addition to his troubles. Philip left his ledger, and walked across the room to where his sister-in-law stood, pursued by Dot, who never let go of his coat-tail.

Dame Batters followed Jane into the room, with a strange, scared look upon her white, withered face. She had dressed herself in her best clothes—a poor old suit of rusty weeds—for the occasion, and she twitched nervously at the fingers of her worn thread gloves, while she glanced appealingly from one of the gentlefolks to the other, and made her little respectful curtsey, in defiance of a mortal anxiety about her child.

"I made bold to come, ma'am," she began, in very shaking accents, "and askin' pardon, you see, ma'am, of your good gentleman and Master Philip there," with another Sunday school "bob" at each of their names, "for a bringin' in of my trouble along o' your trouble, and wishin' of you comfort and relief where only comfort and relief is to be found; and it's Master Philip as I was a-wanting to speak to most, for it's him as engages the men, and—oh, my boy! my boy! Where is he? What have you done with him? You didn't ought to have taken my Jem away from me, if you couldn't give him me back again. And me an old woman, so near my time! Oh dear! oh dear! my boy! my pretty boy! What shall I do?—what shall I do?"

She sat down on one of the drawing-room chairs, and rocked to and fro. Even in her misery she kept on the extreme edge of the seat, and spared the carpet as much as she could from contact with her muddy shoes.

George had not courage to look at her. Philip went and took her hand. Dot, spellbound, with mouth and eyes wide open, watched her mother's movements, as the latter poured out a glass of sherry, and forced it on the poor shaking old

dame. Mrs. George was always composed in such cases. Though she would have offered a cup of cold water in a manner to have shocked Brummell, who once told a lady that she *took* physic, *took* advice, *took* a liberty, but *drank* tea, she was a capital nurse on most occasions, and especially proud of her skill in defeating hysteria, whether natural or assumed.

"Take some wine!" she said, very authoritatively, and held the glass itself to the trembling, toothless lips. "Empty it! down with it, every drop! Now, my good dame, Philip will tell you all he knows about your son. It seems impossible he can have come to harm last night in our terrible disaster. Philip will tell you. Philip knows. Philip has been making inquiries all the morning."

Mrs. George shuddered, nevertheless, at the horrible vision her own attempts at consolation conjured up. There was no doubt that Jem Batters had been the last person seen in the brewery; that it was his turn to sit up all night for the express purpose of preventing the catastrophe that had actually taken place; neither had anybody set eyes on him since. The only hope lay in the fact that not the slightest trace of a man's dress or a man's bones had as yet been discovered among the ruins. This consolation, however, would tell also in another and more dreadful sense. He might have been so entirely consumed that not a cinder of him was left, and this, indeed, seemed the more probable result of the two.

Philip tried to reason with the poor old woman, but in vain. He urged every argument he could think of in extenuation of the ghastly surmise that was present to all their minds, though none of them would have admitted it. Dame Batters always returned to her unanswerable argument—

"If he wur alive, he'd 'a come to his poor old mother. Such a good son as he allays wur, my Jem. Not steady, you know, like some on 'em, though I paid his schoolin' regular after his poor father was gone. But a good son, allays wur, and allays will be—there!"

Then she seemed to try and remember something, looking blankly at the wall, and gasping, while she fumbled, with her trembling old hands, at her bonnet-strings.

But Mrs. Stoney's remedy, simple as it was, had its effect. As the wine nerved her system, the gasping ceased, and presently large tears gathered slowly in the dim, bleared eyes of the grief-stricken mother. Then Dot, whose attention had never wandered from her for an instant, reached up a

little hand, and stroked the wrinkled cheek, murmuring "Poor, poor!" and so the floodgates opened. She wept on unrestrainedly, and grew every moment more hopeful and more composed.

By degrees, Philip induced her to take a less desponding view of her son's disappearance. After a while she became sanguine enough to feel hurt, and even angry, that he had not been to see her, knowing she must be so anxious; and then she got better every minute. But she had not left the house-door a hundred yards behind, ere a relapse came on, and a tidy, showily dressed little personage, coming to pay Mrs. George Stoney a visit, was rather shocked to see a dingy old woman sitting on a heap of stones by the wayside, crying as if her heart would break, and, without being uncharitable, came to the inevitable conclusion that she was drunk.

Now this showily dressed personage was no other than Miss Prince, who had journeyed all the way from Tollesdale to Middlesworth in a fly, on receipt of the intelligence that her old friend Isabella Richards was in sorrow, and her husband's brewery burnt to the ground. Miss Prince, you see, with her anatomically disproportionate heart, was a thoroughly unselfish little woman, and never grudged trouble or discomfort in the cause of a friend. Her present expedition had been productive of both. In the first place, Miss Prince entertained a profound distrust of all such vehicles and horses as are licensed by Government to be let for hire. She was persuaded that the animals were unsafe, vicious and unsound; purchased therefore by the proprietors at a low price, with a culpable disregard for human life; that the conveyances furnished were faulty in construction, and liable to upset on any irregularity of surface, besides having broken springs, worn-out tires, and linch-pins on which no reliance could be placed down-hill. She was satisfied, too, from her own observation and experience, that the drivers were sometimes uncivil, often inebriated; that they hurried recklessly over the most dangerous parts of the road, without attaining a proper average of speed on the whole distance; and that their extortions at its close were in direct proportion to the discomfort inflicted on the passenger during the journey. With these apprehensions and these sentiments, a drive of a few miles in a hired carriage of any description was to Miss Prince an ordeal by fear, an ordeal by suffering, and an ordeal by battle.

Also, before starting, she had a difference of opinion with

Lady Waywarden—first, on the necessity; secondly, on the feasibility; and finally, on the propriety of her expedition.

Beaten in detail on each of these points, her ladyship had retired, like a skilful general, on the next, and indeed had brought her forces up for general action, along the whole line, when the announcement of Miss Prince's fly at the door put an end to the controversy. She retired then from the struggle; but her companion knew too well that it would be resumed, again and again, till she had given in a humiliating and unqualified submission. All this worked in Miss Prince's mind, and brought into shape a scheme on which she had long meditated, but never yet mustered courage to put in practice.

Lady Waywarden was not one bit a more difficult person to live with than ninety-and-nine other ladies, who find it conduces to their own comfort to make another woman uncomfortable, under the name of a companion. She possessed intellect above the average; a fine sense of the *argumentum ad absurdum*, and not more selfishness than properly belonged to her habits of life and station. If you had said to her, "You pay a lady of education and refinement to do that which is repugnant to your own estimate of those qualities; you require her to possess such manners as shall entitle her to live on terms of equality with yourself, and yet lose no opportunity of impressing on her, by word and deed, that she is your inferior and subordinate; you purchase, at a very inadequate remuneration, her time, her inclinations, her opinions, her self-respect, above all, her prejudices; and you expect, that by calling her a companion and making her dine with you at eight o'clock, which probably disagrees with her, she will thankfully accept your whims, your sarcasms, your thoughtless ridicule, your wilful neglect, and will forget, because she sits in the drawing-room (not in an easy-chair), that she has none of the personal freedom enjoyed by the domestics below-stairs; not one-tenth of the comforts of the steward's room, or the ease of the servants' hall." If, I say, you had urged such a protest as this on Lady Waywarden, she would simply have considered you odious, vulgar, and presuming, with a democratic tendency to confound the distinctions of society, and strong symptoms of madness premonitory or confirmed.

Her ladyship's own opinion was, that she paid her daughter's ex-governess a liberal salary for the performance of very trifling duties; and she summed up her convictions in the light and easy nature of her yoke, with the comfortable assurance that "Miss Prince don't mind it."

But Miss Prince did mind, nevertheless. For months past she had been gathering resolution to leave Tollesdale and set up once more for herself. She had talked it over with Lady Julia; for Miss Prince could no more do without a confidant and adviser, than without a box of Child's night-lights and a double nightcap. The young lady, in her usual free-spoken way, had much shocked her by declaring, "If I was you, and mamma ever pitched into me again, I would very soon make my lucky, and hang out on my own hook somewhere else"; nor was this advice, though couched in the terms Viscount Nethersole brought with him from Eton, so unpalatable as the language in which it was offered. They had even got so far as consulting upon ways and means, wherein the pupil's worldly knowledge far exceeded that of her former governess. Notwithstanding the drawback of her invalid sister, years of economy, and an unexpected legacy from her military uncle, as she called the clerk in the War Office, had made of Miss Prince a small capitalist. Probably, her all might have represented two years of Lady Waywarden's pin-money. This nest-egg she had at last resolved to cook, in such a manner, however, as to extract from it the greatest quantity of nourishment. A furnished house in a genteel situation, of which she should let off the different floors to quiet lodgers at exorbitant rents, was Miss Prince's idea of independence; perhaps because it was as yet untried. Lady Julia warmly supported the plan. It would be so pleasant, she thought, to take flowers and things from Covent Garden to her old governess, in her morning drives, the days papa was too lazy to ride, and Cockamaroo, the well-bred, white-legged chestnut was missed by his admirers and his mistresses in the Park. Miss Prince's future, therefore, although she was an elderly lady, was only just opening on her, you see, when she started for Mrs. George Stoney's that morning after the fire.

She had put on her smartest clothes; people generally do when they pay visits of condolence. She came in with a shawl of great splendour, fastened high up round her throat, gloves and ribbons of dazzling hue to match, and a whole hamper of vegetables in her bonnet. Even Jane was confounded by her prismatic appearance, and stood aghast, with the door in her hand, while the little woman, running up to Mrs. George, fairly disappeared in that ample lady's embrace, and without speaking a word, burst out crying immediately as if her heart would break.

"Take a glass of wine," said Mrs. Stoney, confident in the

universal panacea—the perfect cure!—and she signed to George and Philip to leave the room; but against this the little woman proceeded hysterically to protest, entreating their forbearance, and gulping little mouthfuls of sherry, most of which found its way into her eyes and nose, and windpipe, with incoherent assurances of friendship, and promises of composure between the gasps.

"To think I should find you here, dear!" she at length mustered steadiness to exclaim, as if her own home had been the last place in which to look for Mrs. George. "To think of my dear Bella—I always called you Bella, you know, when you were in disgrace—my dear Bella, burnt out, and—and in such a state altogether," proceeded Miss Prince, looking round the room, as if its walls were blackening and smouldering into ruin. "My dear, I couldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it; and, to speak the truth—we've never had any secrets, have we, dear?—I've just popped over from Tollesdale to see how you bore it, and to tell you I'm going to leave Lady Waywarden; and—and—to know if I cannot be of any assistance?—There! Now it's out; and I'm better."

"It was like you, dear Miss Prince," said Mrs. George quietly, while her husband and Philip shook the new visitor by the hand. "You'll take your bonnet off, won't you? And so you've closed your engagement with Lady Waywarden. Well, I always did say"—

But here Miss Prince, in a high state of nervousness, interrupted, holding her bonnet on with both hands, as though she feared it might be violently abstracted, and she was quite unequal to the occasion without it.

"A word on business first, dear Bella; your good husband and Mr. Philip will excuse me. Gentlemen understand business so much better than ladies. It's partly to ask their advice that I came. You see, Mr. Stoney, I've some hundreds of pounds to invest just now—not many. Therefore, I'm told, building is the best of all speculations; and so I thought perhaps you might intend restoring the brewery, with all the modern improvements of course," explained Miss Prince, taking for granted she was giving the conversation a thoroughly practical turn, "and that you wouldn't mind allowing my small matter to remain in your hands, at whatever interest you thought proper, and indeed that could be quite an after consideration. You see, I don't understand business; yet I've made Bella there a pretty good accountant, Mr. Stoney, you'll confess; though, when I first began with her, she couldn't make a sum of simple addition come the same twice

over; but now"— and here, in her endeavours to cheer them all up, Miss Prince tried to laugh, and burst into a sobbing, choking fit of such a violent nature as might have been alarming and even prejudicial to a nursing lady of less experience and composure than Mrs. George.

Philip and his brother looked at one another silently for a minute, then the latter took Miss Prince solemnly by the hand—"I understand you," said he; "a child like Dot here might understand such simple, staunch generosity as yours. You want to throw all you have into the gulf of my ruin; and if I allowed you, I should not only be a rogue, but a brute!"

"You misunderstand me quite," she interposed hurriedly, and with strong symptoms of the hysterics coming on again. "It is a mere matter of business; isn't it, Mr. Philip? You would make it up eventually. You would return me more than I advanced. It would be the foundation of a fortune to me. Out of evil springs good, you know. Oh!" she added, holding fast by the bonnet, and looking imploringly from one to the other, to fix her eyes at last on her old pupil, "let me help you, Bella. Bella, let me do something for you! Let me lend you a hundred pounds, at least! Fifty pounds—twenty pounds—ten pounds! Don't send me away without giving me *some* consolation; if it was only a beggarly ten-pound note."

Pending the delivery of this address, Mrs. George was observed to rock her baby violently to and fro, much to the derangement of its digestive functions, until a sudden impulse prompted her to seize on Dot, and carry both children tumultuously from the room, followed wildly by Miss Prince, who had not as yet taken off a single article of her out-of-door clothing. Mrs. George's bedroom door was then heard to close with a bang, and notwithstanding that lady's social composure during the whole morning, it is my belief that the two women having fled to sanctuary, refreshed themselves with a good, hearty, comfortable cry upstairs.

CHAPTER XII

RAISING THE WIND

IT must not be supposed that the effects of a Middlesworth ball died out with the extinction of its lights, or the retirement of Tootle and Dinne from their musicians' gallery above ; nor even with the putting to rights of the Town Hall —a process that occupied the whole of the following day. On the contrary, seeds were annually sown at these gatherings, which did not come to ear for months, or even years—seeds of rivalry, of friendship, of contention, of goodwill ; sometimes of true and deep affection, yielding eventually a golden harvest, to be reaped and gathered and garnered up for the abiding riches of two lifetimes. In the present, no less than in former instances, many and various were the results of the ball I have ventured to describe. Few of the young people who attended it were altogether free from its subsequent influence. Lady Julia, although hardened by a couple of London seasons, and, so to speak, acclimatised to balls, seemed confirmed in many whims and vagaries which had been considered heretofore but passing caprices of the moment ; the very next day, sitting with her mother after luncheon, pretending to work, she had expressed herself in a vague and contradictory manner, touching her evening's amusement.

" Of course there were all sorts of people there, my dear," observed Lady Waywarden, settling her feet on the fender and her back to the boudoir window, through which even the November daylight came in rose-tinted, though subdued. " People not even second-rate, and that your father wishes one to know. So absurd ! I often wonder what vulgar people and fools, my dear, were made for ? I suppose we shall learn in a future state. Really, I'm glad I stayed at home. So it was a wretched ball, was it, Ju ? "

" Infamous," answered the young lady, with a mischievous smile gleaming in her eyes. " A war-dance, literally, of savage tribes, mamma ; but without scalps, you know, and the war-paint very badly put on."

"Were there any tolerable dresses?" asked Lady Waywarden languidly. "Of course the country people made themselves frights. How did the duchess look?"

"Too much top-hamper," answered the daughter. "Otherwise, well turned out. That Italian maid knows nothing about hairdressing. The duchess's wreath was all adrift after the second waltz. Never mind, she's a darling! and I wish she hadn't been obliged to start off before luncheon. It's deadly lively, now they're all gone."

"Complimentary, my dear," observed the elder lady, totally unmoved, however, by the inference. "So you were bored, my poor child, I fear?"

"Dreadfully," assented the other; "and yet I should like to be going again to-night, mamma," she added, with a sigh.

Now this seemed to have become Lady Julia's normal state for a considerable period. She was still brilliant, amusing, full of fun, devoted to papa, and fearfully addicted to slang, yet, at the same time, she had occasional fits of depression; brief indeed, and succeeded by unnaturally high spirits, but which puzzled Miss Prince considerably, though they escaped the notice of Lady Waywarden.

"You never were remarkable for consistency, my dear," observed the ex-governess one day to her former pupil; "but now you don't know your own mind for two minutes together."

To which Lady Julia replied—"I wish I didn't, my dear; I should be a precious deal jollier!"—refusing, however, any further explanation of this dark and morbid sentiment.

Miss Prince was really going away now, so of course she and her pupil were fonder of each other than ever.

Miss Brooke, too, performing her daily routine of duties at Bridlemere, seemed more tired by her ball than was natural for an able-bodied young woman, who had danced but half a dozen dances, in a room not overcrowded, and with a good floor. Neither did her fatigue wear off with the lapse of time. On the contrary, week by week Helen's cheek grew paler and her smile less frequent. She tended her father more studiously than ever; she went about, too, as regularly amongst the poor, never missing Dame Batters, and affording that sorrowing old woman all the consolation possible under her bereavement, for there were no tidings of Jem. But her walks no longer made her face glow, and her eyes sparkle, as they used a while ago. She ran up no red ensign now, and even the white flag under which she cruised was hoisted, so to speak, but half-mast high. Nay, even after

Mr. Multiple had called, and he often came to Bridlemere of late, her depression appeared more decided than before.

Such a visitor one would have thought must have been enlivening to any lady. He was well-dressed, he was, yes, he *was* good-looking, no doubt. Mrs. George Stoney, indeed, at the ball, had ruled that he was "a handsome, and remarkably stylish man." He could talk on any subject fluently, and knew all the news and gossip of town and country. Moreover, he thought Helen beautiful, and did not conceal his admiration.

He was a great friend, too, of her brother, not of Jack; though they were scrupulously civil, there was a natural antipathy between these two gentlemen; but with the hussar he was hand-and-glove. Why could he not stand equally high in the good graces of Miss Brooke?

Multiple seemed fairly settled now at Middlesworth. Whatever was his business, it would appear that it bore neglect without prejudice, or could be carried on with advantage from a distance. He had moved from No. 6 into the most commodious set of rooms in the Plantagenet Arms, giving choice little dinners, to the infinite profit of that establishment, and submitting to exorbitant charges, on condition that he furnished his own wine. He was not, however, a man who shut his eyes to imposition. He took care to let his entertainers know that he submitted less from ignorance than forbearance. Therefore, he was better treated than more confiding customers. He brought down four good weight-carrying horses from some mysterious hunting quarters on the London and North-Western line. Horses that he gave three hundred apiece for, and that were well worth two. He rode them fairly, steadily; not exactly in the front rank, but with no more scrupulous regard for safety than the generality of the field. His red coat was well made, his boots and breeches were well put on. His second horseman came up in the nick of time with a capacious silver sandwich box flanked by a double flask of sherry, and he gave away cigars of unusual size and fragrance with indiscriminate liberality. At the covert-side he became undoubtedly rather popular than otherwise, and the general opinion there was that he meant to stand for the town. In Middlesworth itself they did not know what to make of him; but on his offering to give ten pounds, unsolicited, to a local charity, the sitting Member, whose seat, though perfection in the saddle, was very insecure at Westminster, received a hint from his committee to bestir himself, for that there was a hidden enemy in the field.

Even at Middlesworth people do not hunt every day, nor, if they did, would four horses be sufficient for the purpose, except on paper. Mr. Multiple, I think, liked his off-days the best. If he could make an excuse, he generally called at Bridlemere; if that was impracticable, he wrote a vast quantity of letters, and then lounged up to the barracks, where an idle man is always acceptable. Arm-in-arm with Walter Brooke, the pair trod the pavement of Middlesworth in a style to which the honest townsfolk were totally unaccustomed. Two such elaborately dressed dandies might have attracted notice even in London. The muffatee-makers, male and female, audibly expressed their sentiments of admiration and disgust: the young ladies in the bonnet-shop put their stitches in all awry, for five minutes after they had passed; and Mr. Dowlas, looking wildly for his young man to measure off a yard of calico, would discover him bareheaded in the street, gazing after the twofold apparition with many conflicting feelings, of which envy was the strongest, depicted on his round and simple face. Their conversation on such occasions, I am bound to say, was neither amusing nor instructive. It consisted usually of the following remarks, varied only in emphasis by the weather, and the state of the speaker's digestion—

"Dull place this, the days there's no hunting."

"Beastly hole!"

"I never came across so few pretty women."

"Nor so many ugly ones."

"Have you seen to-day's paper?"

"I trust it's not going to freeze."

"Let's go up to the barracks and draw Rags."

With which proposal they mended their pace, and walked on resolutely, as men who have now an aim and an object in life.

Rags, I need hardly state, was too glad to receive them. Hospitality itself, and abounding in leisure, all comers were welcome to his barrack-room. Of late, too, Rags had become more of a dandy-worshipper than ever, and his confirmation in this fallacy was another result of the past Middlesworth ball.

That one dance with the duchess, simple quadrille though it was, had produced no trifling effects on both. With her Grace, indeed, its influence was purely physical. Overheated, at anyrate, by a previous waltz, and standing in the draught of the doorway, she had caught a cold that confined her to her room, a most impatient patient, for weeks. But Rags,

who never had a cold in his life, did not come off so easily. Raised by the charming manners of his partner to the seventh heaven of social gratification, his moral being had been shaken to its centre the while. He was no longer satisfied with the gaieties of the mess-room, and the triumphs of the barrack-yard. He was fit for something better, he began to think, than the bandying of jokes with the veterinary surgeon, or the leading of a squadron straight on a given point, at a walk. Visions began to flit through his brain of an exchange into the Life Guards; a quiet brougham to take him out to dinner; a stall at the opera, and a T-cart to drive in the Park. He seemed to have been vegetating, hitherto, a cauliflower in the country, when he ought to be transplanted as an exotic to the town. Why, these great ladies were not so formidable after all! The duchess was infinitely easier to get on with than Mrs. George Stoney; her words were not half so long, nor her manners half so imperial. How pleasant to meet her on the same terms in London, and to do the duchess justice, she made no difference in her simple, cordial, unaffected *accueil*, whether in town or country. But innocent Rags had never yet experienced a chill from these atmospheric changes. He little knew how cold the wind sometimes blows off the glaciers in Mayfair. All fine ladies cannot be at the tip-top of the ladder, like the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, and if they must be more civil than they like to those above them, why of course they may be as rude as they please to those below. A man is a ludicrous object, no doubt, with the pleasant smile frozen on his face by a little contemptuous nod, and his extended hand put hastily back in his pocket, or anywhere else out of sight. But as these kindly little offices are never proffered to such monsters as from age, self-esteem, or a happy stolidity, have become callous and indifferent, I gather, that the more ingenuous the victim the more exhilarating must be the sport. Rags might have gained some insight into these peculiarities could he have contrasted the welcome of Lady Waywarden, for instance, in her own house at Tollesdale, with her greeting under other roofs in the neighbourhood of Grosvenor Square.

Mr. de Rolle was all on fire now to go to St. Barbs. The duke was to have a hunting party the following week, and he would have given a good deal for an invitation, to which, however, he did not quite see his way. I do not mean to say that Rags was fool enough to have fallen in love with the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, but everybody knows the effect on a young and inexperienced man, of association with a woman his superior in rank, intellect, attainments, and

surroundings; beautiful besides, and approaching, as he sees her from below, to his imaginary ideal of perfection. It refines him; it elevates him; it sheds over him the first tinge of romance, that is to be fully coloured hereafter by another hand.

It was, I conceive, something of this vague, yet lofty devotion, to a sentiment rather than an individual, which, in the days of chivalry, laid many a lance in rest, for the renown of ladies whom knights had scarcely even looked upon at a less distance than the space dividing balcony from lists; which caused a champion to shout in the battle a name he had never dared to whisper in the bower; which urged George Douglas to risk life and liberty for Mary Stuart; which bade the noblest of all the noble Cravens carry on his battered helmet the glove of Bohemia's beautiful queen; and which now prompted our friend Rags to visit at St. Barbs, and feast his eyes on the handsome, happy duchess, in her own home.

He was cogitating this very matter, and how to bring it about, when his friends came boisterously in, and broke the thread of his meditations.

"We've wandered up to smoke a weed with you, Rags, as usual," said his brother officer, seating himself without ceremony, whilst Multiple, more polite, observed—

"They were in luck to find Mr. de Rolle at home."

Whereupon the hospitable Cornet hallooed loudly for Belter, and that domestic appeared forthwith, armed with the three brandies and sodas he conceived necessarily required for the proper reception of a morning call.

Neither Multiple nor Walter felt equal to the consumption of this early stimulant, but Rags, rosy and clear-eyed, hesitated not to refresh himself with the invigorating draught. Then the three began to converse, as men will, first of their horses, secondly of other people's horses, and lastly, of their own horses again.

"Why shouldn't we go round and see him," said Walter, closing the description of an animal then standing in the officers' stables, on the sale of which, after some very successful ride, he counted to extricate him from the most pressing of his pecuniary difficulties. It occurred to him, that his friend Multiple, who seemed rich, and fond of hunting, might possibly buy at once, particularly if the owner did not appear anxious to sell. He made a rapid calculation of the hungriest creditors whose mouths must be stopped without delay, also of the highest figure he could ask for his horse, but his face was a

study of utter carelessness and imperturbability, while the three proceeded to the stable, and he added, in a tone of extreme weariness—

"Better see all the screws when we're about it. There's Rags, with a regular string, and Goody Two-shoes to lead their gallops for them. I've got a clever pony, Multiple, if that's at all in your line. Well, if you like, we'll go and look at Fugleman first."

Multiple had the Stud Book at his fingers' ends. That and a corresponding work of reference, the Peerage, are studies of themselves; nevertheless, men can be found who have mastered both, and Walter's friend was one of them.

"You said he was quite thorough-bred, I think," remarked the latter. "Somehow, I don't remember the name."

"You remember Fenella, though," replied Walter. "Well, he's by Advance, out of Fenella; and Fenella, you know, was by Frantic, out of Dumb-Bell; by the Mute, out of Glide; by the Shadow, and so up to the Phantom blood. Oh yes, as thorough-bred as Eclipse; but he was a late foal, and they never trained him, so there he is, as fresh on his legs as a two-year-old. Six off; very quiet; can't get him down if you try; carry over fourteen stone, and a child might ride him. He's not the least my sort of horse, you know, and I hate him; but he's the safest mount, and honestly the best hunter, I think, between this and Melton. Strip him."

The last sentence was addressed to a lad apparently some ten years of age, really over twenty, who could only reach Fugleman's withers by standing on a stable-bucket. Nevertheless, this abortion, when once in the saddle, had the strength and nerves of a giant; could ride a steeplechase against half the professionals, and heaped on his charge all the affection which would have been divided amongst father, mother, brothers, sisters, and friends, if he had them.

Fugleman laid his ears back, and caught the manger with his teeth, whereat Multiple hurried out of the stall in unseemly haste, not, however, till he had satisfied himself of the animal's faultless points and fine condition; then he contemplated him from a safer position in the rear.

Fugleman was a large, handsome, grandly shaped bay horse, with great power behind the saddle, showing unquestionable evidence of "race" in his well-turned quarters, and the setting-on of his hind-legs. His shoulders were lengthy and sloping, his neck a little loose, as though he might take some riding (and this, I think, was the reason

Multiple did not buy him), his head rather large and lean, with long, but fine, almost transparent ears. It was the horse's eye, though, that gave character to the whole animal, and from which could be predicted the docility, courage, and generosity of his nature. Large, dark, and brilliant, it was almost womanly in the soft, confiding expression of its glance; like a woman's, too, it seemed to seek approval and sympathy from its lord—seemed to say: "Love me, trust me, humour me but a little, and if I die for it, I will never fail you at your need."

Altogether, Fugleman looked like a "mount" that would give a man as good an idea of flying as he was ever likely to acquire whilst clothed in mortal form.

"Will you see him out?" asked Walter, detecting, as he thought, a glimmer of purchase in Multiple's eye. "Will you lay your leg over him? You can canter him round the barrack-yard. He's very quiet, and it really is a pleasure to feel such a horse as that."

But Multiple shook his head and declined. It was not his way to jump on strange horses at a moment's notice, and tempt his fate in unfamiliar barrack-yards. Like many others, he was a fair horseman on his own horse, with his own saddle and his own bridle, after a small glass of curaçoa, too, just to steady his nerves; but an *impromptu* gallop was a different thing altogether. He was thinking, moreover, of the noble, generous creature before him, not with regard to his mettle, pace, and powers of endurance, but his specious appearance, and the long-suffering liberality of the public—reflecting how he would like to enter him for some great steeplechase, and make him a favourite, backing him staunchly in "ponies," and instructing a friend in London to lay against him lavishly in hundreds, then at the last moment to lame him, or poison him, or bribe some reckless rider to pull him back forcibly at his fences, and break both their necks rather than win.

Ah! if men were but as honest as horses, we need borrow no lantern of Diogenes, for we could see them in plenty by daylight.

"He's too good for hunting," remarked Multiple, as they walked out of Walter's stable, and the latter knew by the way he said it that he was no purchaser. "Why don't you train him, and put him into the Great National? I haven't seen one more likely to win it this season."

"Why, Mexico has the refusal of him if we ever part," answered Walter, which was, indeed, to a certain extent true, that wealthy young nobleman having *almost* offered three

hundred for this valuable animal. "Besides, I can't afford to keep horses, and get no work out of them whilst in training. I'm very poor, you know," he added, with a laugh. "Very poor, and very hard up besides."

Rags had walked on to open his stable-door, and was holding close consultation with his groom. Multiple looked after him with an odd expression, half sneer, half approval on his face. He shrugged his shoulders, and repeated—

"Hard up! and *here*! Well, it's extraordinary to me how badly people manage their own business."

"What do you mean?" asked Walter.

"Mean!" replied the other. "What should I mean? I thought you understood things better in the light dragoons. Why, here you have the Bank of England in the barracks, and you talk of being hard up."

Walter stared at him for a few moments in unaffected surprise.

"I wish I knew *any* bank that would cash my bills," said he. "Fellows talk about money being easy. I don't know what they call easy. I'm sure I've always found it very hard to get, and harder still to keep."

"Money is only a conventional term," answered Multiple, stopping to light one of his huge cigars. "It doesn't express a lot of sovereigns in a bag, any more than wealth is inferred by a large encumbered estate, with a title to keep up. Credit, after all, is the motive power of this great commercial country; and paper, that is *good* paper, represents property just as well as bullion."

"You mean that a fellow can always draw a bill," replied Walter, "and renew when he can't meet it. I don't say it's a bad plan, mind, for kite-flying on a proper system, and with a little method, will keep a man afloat for years. But there's always one awkward question connected with it, who is to get up behind?"

"Young in years!" exclaimed Multiple, with mock solemnity; "but old in the tortuous labyrinths of iniquity! It is not for me to teach a child of your intelligence how the bubble is created, and the soap applied. Is not a comrade dearer (a good deal dearer to some fellows) than a brother? Is not friendship described as love without its wings? Look at that Cornet, even now awaiting our approval of his stud. Simple integrity beams in his eye, and mantles on his cheek. Fourteen stone, if he turns a pound, and exuding gold from every pore. Healthy, wealthy, and—not—wise! Surely nature has provided him for the express purpose of liquidation.

Shall we milk the Ayrshire in the cow-house—the favourite at the corner—and when the bursting vessels swell appealingly under the cunning hand, draw back, mock modest, and forbear to fill the pail? I tell you the name of De Rolle is as good as Rothschild. Rags is your friend, and Rags stinks of money. A bill at three months is convertible at a trifling discount, and I am wasting my breath and spoiling my cigar, for Walter Brooke knows all this as well as Frank Multiple, who has been studying the interest tables and the money market ever since he was three years old."

Walter laughed. "Work the Jews first," said he carelessly, "and then come to the Christians. By the way, Multiple, you must dine here with Rags next week instead of me. It's all the same, old fellow, and you won't be offended; but I've promised to go to St. Barbs for a day or two, and it depends on what hunting there is how soon I get back. Rags will take excellent care of you, and be delighted. Let us go and look at his horses. If he could ride her, Goody Two-shoes is the best he's got."

The speaker did not seem inclined to resume the money question, and Multiple, who cared but little for horses out of which no profit could be made, soon excused himself, and retired for the rest of the evening to his inn.

Walter Brooke had been some few years embarked in life, and was now beginning to feel the pressure that a good position, a liberal outfit, and a fair start, stave off for a time. Though the effects were sufficiently pleasant while they lasted, it was, perhaps, a misfortune to Walter that his person and manners were of that kind which is most appreciated in London society. He was handsome in a manly and even remarkable style, without being the least *a tiger*. He was always quiet, undemonstrative, and with his wits about him; unflurried by success, and perfectly callous to the frankest rebuff. He had the knack of knowing people's carriages and horses at a vast distance, and remembered all their different relatives by marriage and otherwise. That is to say, people about whom it was worth his while to be interested. When in London, he was sure to have the latest news, which he neither trumpeted in your ears nor threw contemptuously at your head, but told in a quiet, confidential, matter-of-course way, with a touch of humour, and a strong dash of sarcasm. He was popular everywhere, and usually seemed to consider himself a little too good for his company, whatever it might be. No doubt, had he lived earlier in the century, he must have achieved fame.

Why the women liked him, it is, of course, impossible for me to explain. I have seen so many men utterly different in every particular, without and within, yet all first favourites with the sex, that I am puzzled to define the qualities of mind or body that are most apt in the allurement of their good graces. They certainly look kindly on manly comeliness, yet, heavens! what ugly fellows have we not all envied riding triumphant in the lists of Love. They like clever men, so they say; yet I find it conceded by a majority that a fool is the best material for a husband. They profess to admire eloquence and to delight in being amused; nevertheless, with their own charming flow of language, I should feel inclined to back the listener against the talker in the long-run. Perhaps it is as well that their predilections should defy calculation. My own belief is that they are most susceptible to romantic devotion, when expressed by ease of manner, willingness to oblige, and a never-failing facility in acts of practical attention. A limited younger brother's allowance, even added to a subaltern's pay, is soon consumed in the boots, gloves, blacking, eau-de-cologne, and hack-cabs of a London summer, leaving little margin for these infamous ready-money transactions called water-parties, and none whatever for tailor's bills, keep of horses, purchase of carriages, stalls at the opera, cigars, bouquets, and other the mere necessaries of life. Two or three "good things" at Epsom and Ascot, with one extraordinary fluke at Newmarket, did, indeed, keep Walter's head above water longer than he had any right to expect; and brother Jack, too, had helped him, out of his own small pittance, as far as he was able; but in the affairs of men, as in those of nature, you cannot have the flood-tide without the ebb, and here was Walter, at last, left high and dry upon the strand.

He was literally in want of two or three sovereigns to pay for moving his horses to St. Barbs, and for pocket-money during his visit at the duke's. Of course, he never dreamed of giving up the visit; the natural proceeding was to obtain the sovereigns.

He was to dine *tête-à-tête* with Rags, at the barracks, and went to dress rather early, sending his servant down to a law-stationer's shop in the town, before it closed.

The two brother officers had a cosy, pleasant little dinner, by a good fire. Their wine was perfection, and they drank as if they liked it. Rags talked incessantly about the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, and hinted, clumsily enough, at his desire for an invitation to the forthcoming gathering at St. Barbs.

"The duke is sure to ask you," observed Walter carelessly, while he filled his glass with claret, and turned his chair towards the fire. "The duke never misses a fellow who seems fond of hunting, particularly if he can ride a bit. Let me see. He meets at Oakover, on Friday, in his best country. You can reach it from here, if you send the horses by train. I suppose you'll ride Goody Two-shoes, and make an example of us all if you get a start."

The other's eyes glistened. He did so enjoy being patted on the back, particularly by Walter, from whom he seldom received this encouragement, but who was exceedingly gracious to-night. Rags had mentioned the duchess's name a score of times during dinner already, now he brought it in again—

"Why, you see, when I danced with the duchess that night, she asked me a good deal about hunting, and she *did* say something about the country near St. Barbs, and I thought two or three times she was going to invite me there. I suppose she had to ask *him* first. I say, Walter, I should like to know the duke!"

"He's as good a fellow as the duchess," replied Walter, with a familiarity that somewhat shocked Rags, who winced at his divinity being thus rudely approached. "Let me see, Rags (I think we could do another bottle of this claret, old fellow); I don't know but what I could manage it for you. The duke was a light dragoon himself once, and he likes soldiers better than civilians still."

Rags rang the bell willingly. He appreciated claret—a taste in which I perfectly agree with him. Nor am I sure but that when the wine is sound, the second bottle goes down even more pleasantly than the first. Then he exclaimed, in a voice of deep feeling—

"Walter, you're a real brick! Here's your health!"

The second bottle waned rapidly. By the time it was finished and the cigars alight, both young men were slightly influenced by its qualities. That is to say, Walter's scruples had vanished, if indeed he owned any; and Rags, who was always a good fellow, felt twice as good a fellow now as ever.

"Shall you let Lord Mexico have Fugleman?" asked Rags, winking and glowing, so to speak, with enjoyment, over the red end of his cigar. "He'd jump at him for three hundred, I believe!"

"He's worth more than that," answered Walter thoughtfully. "I don't like to sell him, and yet, altogether, I'm

rather in a mess about my horses. I don't even know whether I shall be able to get to St. Barbs, after all."

Rags looked blank.

"What? Is the grey lame again?" said he, with much commiseration. "Never mind, old chap, that needn't stop you. Take two of mine!"

To be called "old chap" by an individual of whose intellectual powers you have conceived the lowest possible opinion, and whose familiarity you feel less the offspring of friendship than Bordeaux, even when that individual backs the endearing appellation by offering you the pick of his stud, is doubtless an aggravation. You must have good and weighty reasons to bear it placidly. Walter's tone was calm and confidential, while he thanked him for his proposal.

"I've plenty of horses," said he, "so it is not that. The fact is, old fellow, I've bled the governor so freely of late, he hasn't got a drop of the vital fluid left. I don't like to borrow of the Jews, when it's only a question of a month or two, at fifty per cent. I can get all I want on a bill with another fellow's name across it, which is, after all, a mere matter of form, for, of course, it's *my* bill, and I'm answerable for it. What I require is a mere trifle. Only two or, say, three hundred, just to keep me going till the spring. Why, my book on the National's worth twice the money now. Then I take up the bill, cancel the acceptance, and nobody's a bit the wiser. I'd have asked Jack to do it, of course, if I'd seen him to-day; but Jack's the most horrible funker when he's off a horse; and though he'd have done it he'd have jawed for an hour first. After all, a brother officer is the next thing to a brother, and you and I have pulled together now for some time. Look here, Rags! it would be a convenience to me if you could lend me your name—only your name, you understand—for the next twelve weeks. Let me see. The hunting season's nearly over already. Well, certainly for not more than three months; purely and entirely as a matter of form!"

Rags didn't like it. Rags hesitated. He was a generous fellow enough, even about money, though he preferred giving things away in kind, inheriting from both sides of his family a proper respect for the circulating medium, and he would rather have helped Walter, particularly just now, than anybody else in the world. Still, he didn't like it! He made a face like a child taking physic, and Walter observing this reluctance, immediately withdrew his request.

"If you've any superstition about it, old fellow," said he

good-naturedly, "I'll try someone else. Lots of people will be glad to accommodate me without risk, only I'd rather be under obligation to *you*, because we're so much together, and I might be useful to you in return. You're not offended at being asked, old boy, at anyrate, I hope?"

This was too much for Rags. Offended! and by Walter —his friend, his pattern, his passport to St. Barbs; and here he was, refusing this good fellow the most trifling accommodation devoid of inconvenience or hazard. He made up his mind in a moment.

"There's no risk, you say?" he inquired, looking thoughtfully into the coals.

"Not the slightest!" answered Walter. "How can there be? It's my bill, not yours."

"And for how much?" added Rags, struggling sorely between generosity and a constitutional dislike to committing himself.

"Three hundred!" answered the borrower point-blank, adding, "We won't make it a monkey this time, Rags, for fear of frightening you."

"Get the inkstand!" exclaimed the other, flinging the remains of his cigar desperately beneath the grate. "I hate business. Let's do it at once!"

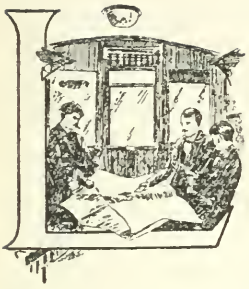
So Walter sent to his room for his writing-case, and produced a piece of paper, and wrote out the bill in due form, with a rapidity and precision that argued experience in such matters; and showed Rags exactly where to affix his signature, impressing on him carefully the whole time, that he was incurring not the slightest risk, and indeed a merely nominal liability. After which performance, they smoked one more cigar, in great good-humour and harmony, retiring to rest early, as they called it, about one a.m.

When they bade each other "Good-night," Rags looked very wise, as if a sudden light had struck in on him. "By Jove, Walter, I don't believe we drew that bill on stamped paper!"

"Oh yes, we did," replied Walter; "I happened to have some 'stiff' in my room." But he wondered at his friend's viridity, and caught himself laughing at it more than once before he went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

CARRYING ON



LONDON, out of the season, is no doubt a gay and bustling place to those who live in it, but to come from the country, on a soft rainy morning in spring, say a week or two after Valentine's Day, and splash through the muddy streets, with a wet blanket of murky clouds close down upon the chimney-pots overhead, and a sea of liquid mire under foot, is perhaps one of the most depressing performances, short of actual misfortune, to which a man can be subjected in a Christian land and a civilised community.

That it becomes tolerable, and even enlivening, when combined with the borrowing of money for short periods, at a high rate of interest, is one of those beautiful contradictions in human nature for which we are unable to account; but it is a singular feature in the idiosyncrasy of mankind, particularly during the elasticity of its third decade, that pecuniary pressure should produce, probably from recoil, a high flow of spirits, and a general state of imperturbable good-humour.

Perhaps there is some truth in the witty Lord Alvanley's precept, that it would be hard, if because a man wanted money, he should therefore want everything else. Perhaps all difficulties are good for us, and therefore it is that we make so many for ourselves.

In one of those quiet streets, within reach of the clubs, the parks, the public offices, and the Strand, there stands a large, well-built, dirty dwelling, from the exterior of which you would infer that it was a roomy and commodious family mansion, with a good deal of substantial furniture running to seed, and housemaids sadly neglectful of their duty. Passing it often, which curiosity alone would prompt you to do, for it

is in a retired and little frequented thoroughfare, you would wonder why you neither saw livery-servants at the door, nor the slightest appearance of life below stairs in the area. Being further informed that it did *not* belong to a dentist, you would forthwith give up guessing at the manners, habits, and social station of the proprietor. The house would become a mystery to you, and might remain so, though you passed it every day during the term of your natural life.

For the London cabman, however, there is no such thing as a mystery. Though you come across a stupid driver every now and then, when you are in an unusual hurry, taken as a body, I believe this fraternity to possess more general information than any class on earth. Mark their philosophical composure under trying circumstances, such as collisions, upsets, and fatal accidents; observe their tranquil recognition of merit, their lofty indifference to evil, their utter callousness to surprise; their self-reliance, their powers of sarcasm, their eloquence in denunciation or repartee. Like the men you meet going to and from races, but never see on the course or elsewhere, they are a class by themselves—how raised, how formed, how educated, I have not sufficient statistical research to explain.

One of these peripatetic philosophers, then, was sitting on the box of his hansom, at the door of the house I have endeavoured to describe, accepting the rain that fell continuously with a resignation highly creditable in the conductor of a vehicle which, unlike the four-wheeler, makes its hay avowedly while the sun shines. His horse showing a good deal of well-shaped anatomy, sinking its lean, handsome head, and resting, as far as possible, the most ailing of its limbs, slept with great composure. The pressure of the carriage had been taken off its back. Obviously the fare was paying a protracted visit, and the driver waited with the patience of a man who is earning money the whole time he is doing nothing.

He did not seem to puzzle his brains with vain speculations as to the house before which he had stopped more than an hour ago. Did this careless demeanour, enhanced by his professional method of chewing a straw, spring from a superiority of knowledge, or indifference to results? My own opinion is, that he was thoroughly conversant with the character of the mansion and its inmates; that he had learnt their trade, their liabilities, their customers; that he knew as well as Walter Brooke himself, whom he had brought here from the station, why his business should take so long to

negotiate, and what obstacles to its termination arose, from that officer's consistent refusal to accept wine, pictures, the lease of a house in Camberwell, or a share in a promising two-year-old, then at Stockbridge, in lieu of any part of the coin for which he had come.

He was not the least surprised, this well-informed cabman, when a large, square, grey-haired man, looking the very impersonation of respectability, bowed Walter to the door, and stood in the gloomy hall, rubbing his hands as if he were washing them, with an action peculiar to people whose avocations oblige them to handle dirty work, metaphorical or real.

The large man conversed affably, but in a tone of fatherly interest, and even remonstrance. He was, apparently, still urging on Walter "something to his advantage."

"No such sherry to be got, captain," said he benevolently, "out of the country itself. Our correspondent obtains it as a personal favour, and forwards it direct. Young men ruin their stomachs with inferior sherry. Think of it, captain. I may not have such a chance to offer you again."

"My good sir," replied Walter, "do you suppose I can afford to *buy* sherry? What do you think I came here for?"

"Well, well," said the other, laughing over his limp white neckcloth, "we are always ready to accommodate — always ready to accommodate. I have incurred more responsibility than I like in transacting our business without reference to my partner, but it was to oblige you, captain—to oblige you. The picture I think you are right to decline, having no permanent residence, though such a picture as that, sir, is a banknote in a frame. With regard to the lease, I might afford to buy it back from you at an increased price in six weeks from this time. I really think you should take the lease! It's worth more and more every day."

"Then why the devil do you want to sell it?" asked Walter, not unnaturally, putting on his gloves the while, and by this time driven to the doorstep.

"We make things dovetail, to suit each other, in our business," was the reply; "and I should like to put you in the way of a good thing, I confess, captain, for my own satisfaction—that is why I confided to you the merits of my partner's young one. You won't breathe a syllable, of course. I believe hatsful of money are to be made out of that horse for the Derby after next. Your share would be worth your troop to you by that time, captain, whether he won or lost.

You understand me. The truth is, my partner's a deal too fond of racing. It doesn't look well for men of business, captain, and I wish I could wean him from it."

"I always hear about your *partner*," said Walter, buttoning his coat with a satisfied air, like a man who has got something inside. "Why do I never see him? I cannot imagine he is such an impracticable lender, and such a screw about discount, as you make out."

The other smiled blandly, and went on washing his hands.

"My partner's time is much engaged," said he. "At present, I believe he is on business of his own somewhere in the country. He will think my terms too liberal, I fear, captain, when we audit our accounts; but I am proud to have been able to accommodate you even at a personal sacrifice. Good-morning—*good*-morning, captain. You will bear in mind, if you please, not to mention the two-year-old."

The square, grey-haired man made one more farewell bow, and closed his own door softly and placidly, while Walter shut down that of the hansom with a bang. Then giving his orders to the imperturbable cabman with a smiling face, for he was in high spirits, he congratulated himself on the past interview and the success of his late enterprise.

Let us see what was the amount of gain he contemplated with such lively satisfaction.

In the first place, he had laid himself under an obligation to a friend, which might or might not prove a source of future inconvenience, but on this point it is right to observe he troubled himself but little. Rags was a good fellow, and it would all come right; so there was an end to that matter. In the next, he had engaged to pay up three hundred pounds of hard money within three months' time. Was it more likely he could meet such a demand at the expiration of that period than now? Well, he thought it was! Events would then have come off which might put him in funds, and, if worst came to worst, he must let that muff Mexico have poor Fugleman. For these liabilities, over how much had he buttoned his pocket to carry on the war? He had fought hard for his spoil, and had avoided, only by dint of persistent resolution, the ownership of five dozen of bad wine, an anatomical daub, ill-drawn and worse coloured; the lease of a tumble-down house; and an indefinite share, with three or four blacklegs, in a problematical race-horse. Waiving all claim to these personalities, he had struggled, shilling by

shilling, for the discount, and found himself, at the close of his interview with Mr. Pounder, for that was the money-lender's name, in possession of four fifty-pound notes, as many tens, a few fives, eleven sovereigns, and three half-crowns. This sum would keep him afloat for some weeks, at anyrate. He would go triumphantly to St. Barbs. He would have a rare ride on Fugleman to-morrow. There was sure to be a scent after the rain, and Oakover was the best covert in the country. Walter placed great reliance on the future. His faith was fixed, though indefinite, in that blind goddess, who certainly gives her aid most freely to those who trust implicitly in her guidance.

Life seemed well worth having, after all. Though the cabman, in letting down the glasses, knocked its hat over its eyes, the fare neither stamped nor swore, and did not leave London without buying a cardcase for Helen, a pair of lazy-tongs for the squire, and a cheap tobacco-stopper for Jack.

He was soon back at the railway station, and, in direct infringement of the company's by-laws, tendering half a crown to the guard of the train on the understanding that this incorruptible functionary should reserve a carriage expressly for himself and his friends.

I think I have observed of late years that young men travel with more impediments in the way of luggage than was the practice long ago in the days of my youth. I have seen, in that primeval age, a rampant dandy of his time making the transit from London to Doncaster outside the mail, which, by the way, he drove, or "worked," as we used to call it, fully half the distance, with no more superfluities than a shawl-handkerchief; no more necessaries than a sherry-flask, and a cigar-case the size of a portmanteau. But to-day they seem to have advanced a whole century in matters of comfort and convenience. The modern traveller who takes a first-class ticket requires as many luxuries as an Eastern potentate. In addition to railway rugs and wrappers of every description, he must be further encumbered by a faggot of sticks and umbrellas, securely strapped together like the bundle in the fable, by an embroidered cap, a travelling lamp, an uncut novel, a paper-knife, *The Times* (with supplement), the *Globe*, a sporting paper, and the *Saturday Review*; nor can any of these extras apparently be crammed into a large leathern reticule, with a pocket in its stomach like a female kangaroo, already stuffed with writing materials, cigar-cases, eau-de-cologne, hair-brushes, and, as I am informed, all the materials for an elaborate toilet.

Each of Walter's three friends possessed the paraphernalia pertaining to his station. There was but little room in their engaged compartment for the half-dozen new packs of cards, without which it was impossible to travel over a score of miles. These lively young gentlemen were going down to join the hunting-party at St. Barbs, and had arranged to dine with Walter at the barracks; and then catch a late train on a branch line, which would bring them to the duke's about midnight. The day would be thus passed in change of scene and excitement. There remained but the period occupied by their journey from London to Middlesworth. This blank, it had been decided, could be agreeably filled up with whist.

The party consisted of Viscount Mexico, an exceedingly rich and uninteresting peer, supposed to be somewhat deficient in brains, but well known at Eton, Oxford, and subsequently in London, as sufficiently careful of his own interests, and not too stupid to play a remarkably good rubber: or to square accounts with his agent scrupulously once a month, whereby the family property, little damaged by a shamefully inadequate settlement on his lordship's mother, did by no means deteriorate under his administration. This young nobleman was very properly the great gun of the party.

The other two, of smaller bore, so to speak, and inferior calibre, were as well known in London as Northumberland House or the Duke of York's Column. Captain Belt of the Life Guards, christened Augustus, but known in the regiment as Tom, was a fair specimen of a class that delights to throw away its advantages, and waste its energies on frivolous pursuits, for which it cares nothing at heart. Tom Belt, with courage, good humour, good health, and good abilities, was satisfied, or I should say, resigned, to pass his days in the narrowest possible circle, even of those amusements for which he seemed to live. To shoot pigeons at Hornsey, to lose glove-bets at Ascot, to be well-dressed, and ride a neat hack in the Park—these were the aims and endeavours of his existence. He had talents of which he was scarcely conscious, for he had never cultivated them. He had affections, frittered away on a hundred different objects, of which he preferred the most unworthy. He had a large estate which he neglected; but, fortunately for him, an agent who allowed no pickings but his own. He had all the accessories that go to form a man of influence in his generation, and what was the result? Tom Belt, with his

cheery manner, his pleasant smile, his good set of teeth, had the reputation of being not quite an idiot, only because he could play a fair rubber at whist!

How many men there are about London completely thrown away from sheer want of a plunge into cold water; who, when braced up by danger, difficulty, or affliction, prove themselves capable of great things; and who, even in the natural and tranquil course of events, do sometimes get tired of frivolity at middle age, and turn to the real working purposes of life. Perhaps, if they *will* do nothing but waste their time till they are ruined, the best thing for them is to get rid of their money as fast as they can. Yet it does seem a pity to lose all the golden years of youth, all the resources and advantages of wealth, because people persist in making a business of pleasure, thereby losing the exquisite flavour afforded by the one, as well as the substantial food comprised in the other.

Tom Belt might well be called one of the drones in the hive. Not so little Champignon, sitting on the opposite seat, and presenting Lord Mexico with a paper cigarette of undeniable quality, imported direct from Madrid, as he assures his lordship, who, possibly in complete ignorance of that capital, seems but little impressed with the fact.

Champignon has worked hard all his life. Nobody knows who he is—nobody thinks of asking. From some men society requires that they should bring their credentials in their hand; others it accepts, as we accept the swallows in the spring, without troubling ourselves where they came from.

Champignon's name is French; his low stature, olive complexion, and dark, piercing eyes, argue a Spanish origin; but when he opens his lips, you are satisfied that English is his mother-tongue. There is a tradition that he speaks many Continental languages like a native. Possibly he may; but there is no mistake about his English; and no foreigner, I think, however great his proficiency, ever yet succeeded in deceiving our national ear. There is also a superstition that he is connected in some mysterious manner with the Government, and this indefinite link seems unaffected by a change of Ministry. Also he disappears suddenly on occasion, even in the middle of the season, for weeks at a time. Vague rumours then arise that he is engaged in important political missions at foreign capitals. On his return, invitations to dinner pour in without number, and his admirers become more infatuated than ever to observe, as he takes care they

shall, that he is hand-and-glove with every *attaché* in London, and that ambassadors themselves clap him on the shoulder, and call him *mon cher* in the Park.

The little man loses nothing, depend upon it, by being a secret from the crown of his French hat to the tips of his nice boots. Nobody knows what he does with himself all the morning, or why he is regularly seen by his acquaintance, which means everyone in London, yet never twice by the same person in the afternoon. Nobody knows whether he lives at the address on his cards, or where he dines when not engaged to one of his noble friends, or why people so often miss him at those great parties in the lists of which his name invariably appears next day. Nobody knows if he is, or is not, connected with several daily, and one weekly paper; or why he is half an hour in advance of the world regarding telegrams, official news, horrible accidents, and domestic scandal. He himself knows everything—where you can get unadulterated sherry; who was the first person to throw himself off the Monument, and where he fell; why Lady Macallummore's hair all came down at the Caledonian ball; how she sent her maid away, and where the maid is gone. Ere he has been twelve hours at St. Barbs he will tell the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil of a shop for cleaning old lace in the Barbican, and what to give her love-birds for the gapes. He will warn the duke of a certain favourite likely to be "made safe" for the Two Thousand; and he will show the land-agent a diagram of a new subsoil plough. Lady Julia calls him "the Pocket Companion and Universal Referee." Perhaps, if obliged to go out, he will enjoy his day's hunting less than any other country amusement; but he will ask his host honestly to put him on a quiet horse, and will get through even this ordeal quietly and creditably enough.

In appearance he is not prepossessing, but he looks what he is—a hard and wiry man, though small. He speaks little, notwithstanding his amount of information, and drinks less; but he smokes cigarettes from morning till night, and makes a fair annual income by his skill in the noble game of whist.

The train has panted out of the station; cleared off a few short white puffs of smoke, as though to bring its lungs into play; indulged in a strange, shrill shriek, like a wild cry of freedom from some living monster, and is fairly settled to its work, thirty miles an hour, over the beautiful pastoral country that lies to the north of London. There is a forty-shilling penalty for smoking, wisely advertised in each carriage, to

enhance the forbidden pleasure of a cigar. It is needless to say that three of these, and a cigarette, are already in full process of consumption. The fellow-travellers talk a little, read a little, find the latter an unpleasant process, and somebody says something about whist.

"The very thing!" observes Tom Belt, turning from the window, out of which he has been scanning the country, searching, I imagine, for the easy places in the fences, and thinking how tempting they look to ride over—"the very thing. Play all the way down; make the time pass. Not too high, I vote. What say you, Brooke? Quiet rubber in the old form; pound points?"

"Pounds and fives," answered Walter carelessly, strong in the possession of ready money; "or ponies, if you like it better. I don't care. Bet what you please."

The hussar was a proficient in the game—perhaps one of the best in London, for his years. Its intricacies suited his turn of mind, and he had made many a welcome hundred by the self-taught habit of remembering every card as it came out. He felt now that he was a turn better than any of his company; for of the other three, though sound average players, Champignon could alone be considered even second-rate. The higher the stakes, therefore, the more profitably, he thought, could he employ his time. Why, he might win enough in a couple of hours to take him well over the next three months; and something seemed to tell him he was in a run of luck just now. So he shuffled the cards, and cut Champignon for a partner, with very decided anticipations of success.

They won the first game triumphantly. Honours divided. Cards pretty equal; but Tom Belt, possibly unused to whist at the rate of thirty miles an hour, committed an egregious blunder, and Mexico might have made more of his diamonds. "Play must tell," thought Walter, as he prepared to deal; and he laid the Life Guardsman thirty pounds to twenty, with considerable *sang froid.*

The next was not so prosperous. The adversaries' cards were of a nature to override any amount of play, and the inferior performers, as Mexico pleasantly observed, "had it all their own way from first to last, and won in a canter."

Fortune will sometimes take the entire management even of such games as whist, in which skill shares so largely with chance. Walter lost the first rubber, though with so good a partner as Champignon. It was discouraging, after this, to have lee-way to make up by the inferior aid of Tom Belt.

Mexico had quite sense enough to know when he was in a good thing. While the train stopped for a minute and a half to take in water, he made the cards, and looked from one adversary to the other.

"Fifty with each on the rubber?" he asked; adding lazily, "what a row that fellow makes with his bell!"

Tom Belt declined. "I'll have a pony with you, if you like; but I think you're rather strong for us."

"I'll take the other seventy-five!" exclaimed Walter eagerly. He had that strange prescience of success which no gambler ever should or *can* resist, though it leads him eventually to ruin.

They won it. They carried everything before them. Picture-cards came tumbling into their hands by threes and fours; small trumps were valueless, and despised. Success! a bumper! All the honours! The rubber resembled a regimental dinner in every respect, save that it was sooner over; and Walter, nearly a hundred to the good, felt that he was in the vein, and would not disappoint his luck.

But it was this very success that led eventually to his discomfiture. In the transit from London to Middlesworth there was time for three rubbers, hardly for four. Nevertheless, one of these had been so quickly played out, that after losing on the next, Walter himself proposed a fourth at still higher stakes, when he found himself once more with the best of the three players for a partner.

Meanwhile the train went gliding on, leaving behind it many a lordly hall, and wooded hill, and lovely glimpse of English meadow scenery; passing bare sky-lines of chalky downs, and wide flats of rich, dark soil, and here a mill-wheel silent in the hollow, and there a gleam of some quiet brook, with pollard willows growing on its banks, until presently the fields became larger, the cattle more numerous, the hedges thicker, blacker, and less frequent; the character of the country, now less arable than pastoral, assumed a freer, wilder aspect, suggestive of galloping, and the train, punctual to its time, ran into Middlesworth station before our friends had come near the conclusion of their rubber.

"Mill's'orth! Mill's'orth! Mill's'orth!" shouted a porter, in the easy tone affected by these functionaries all over Europe, which prevents the possibility of your learning the name of a station unless you knew it before. "All out here, if you please, captain," added the man, opening the door of the compartment in which the four whist players were

absorbed in their game, addressing himself to Walter, whom he knew, and who had given him many a shilling.

"Go to the devil!" answered the hussar, intent upon a certain knave, whose ambush he strongly suspected. "What do you come jawing here for? You're not a first-class passenger!"

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the man, grinning, "train don't go any farther, sir; carriage has to be shunted."

"Shunt and be hanged!" replied Walter. "Here! you sir! Run up to the barracks, and tell them to put dinner off for half an hour. Ask the stationmaster, with my compliments, to have us shunted to a siding, with as little shaking as possible, and put the danger signal on if there's another train due. They know me here. Mexico, it's your deal!"

So the four gentlemen were quickly shunted off the line of traffic, and finished their rubber in great comfort and dignity. Its results, however, were unfortunate for Walter. To Mexico and Belt he lost nearly all the proceeds of his morning's transaction with Mr. Pounder, besides half a crown for the messenger he sent to the barracks, and a sovereign among the porters who moved the carriage for his convenience. Altogether, he did not return five pounds richer than he went, and his groom's book, well he knew, would make a sad hole in this small capital.

It was a pity, you see, that his friends, like himself, belonged to a club of which the members pay their losses at whist in ready money. Otherwise the debt might have stood over with a good many others. He began to wish now that he had taken the sherry, the picture, or even a share in the two-year-old horse. These could not have melted so rapidly. It was hard to decide what should be done next.

Well, it was no use thinking of it in the meantime. Walter was never better company in his life than presiding over the hasty dinner he gave his guests in the barracks. He joked about the hardships of campaigning; apologised for what he called Her Majesty's rations; while he helped them to turtle from Paynter's and pledged them in dry champagne at ninety-six shillings a dozen. He had the faculty, enviable in some respects, but which leads a man too often into fresh difficulties, of throwing off all care and anxiety for a time; of abstracting his mind completely from every subject of future annoyance so long as a sip of pleasure could be extracted from the present hour; and of putting off his sorrows, as he did his debts, to be liquidated hereafter, with interest added to capital.

He was so accustomed to difficulties too, though of late they had been accumulating faster than usual, that he had acquired great readiness of resource in pecuniary embarrassment, and a rapid perception of expedients, which like the *coup d'œil* of a skilful general, seized the remedy almost at the instant of disaster. Even now, laughing gaily over his champagne, and talking of anticipated sport to-morrow, he had made up his mind that Fugleman must leave his own stable for Mexico's at three hundred. One bold ride, he felt sure, would instigate that nobleman to purchase; for the viscount, like many others, was apt to forget that a horse carries some men a good deal better than others. "Yes," he thought, "keep this ass in good-humour, and sell him my poor horse. Buy something else to finish the season with, and then come the spring meetings, with a hundred or so to come and go upon, and all the opportunities of turning them that an industrious man can find or make for himself in the ring. —Mexico, try another glass of that champagne."

His lordship was in unusual spirits. He liked winning money—he liked a good dinner at another man's expense. He was even well satisfied with his company, for Brooke made himself unusually agreeable, and Rags listened to him with a deference to which, amongst his own friends, he was totally unaccustomed.

The latter was a little disappointed that he had as yet received no invitation to St. Barbs, though he hardly expected Walter to bring him one from London in his pocket. But his genial nature soon recovered this trifling drawback, and, as was usually the case, he enjoyed himself without stint or scruple. Given two or three good-humoured fellows, and tolerable wine, it would not have been Rags had he failed to fall in with the jovial humour of the hour.

Time passes rapidly with such a party when engaged in the consumption of an excellent dinner, free from restraint or ceremony. Mexico prosed a good deal about his keepers, and his pheasants, and a certain system of rearing the latter, which he seemed to think nobody else understood. Nevertheless, though he drank freely, he preserved his wits, such as they were, carefully enough. Coarse, heavy, and unimaginative, his was the kind of nature on which wine takes but little effect. While Tom Belt talked himself into a high state of excitement on every subject broached, the viscount never showed the slightest spark of animation but once, and that was when somebody contradicted him. Then he turned angry and unpleasant, till Walter, with considerable tact,

diverted the conversation into a more agreeable channel. There was not much time to spare. The train that should bring the party within a five-mile drive of St. Barbs, left Middlesworth at nine p.m.; nevertheless, before the moment of departure arrived, Tom Belt sang an English, and Champignon a French song, both, I am bound to admit, of an anacreontic character, tending to the subversion of morals and the encouragement of inebriety.

Altogether, though he felt a little low when they left him, and the barracks looked rather dreary, emptied of its guests, Rags enjoyed his evening considerably, and went to bed in a hopeful frame of mind, anticipating great things from the sport of to-morrow.

CHAPTER XIV

TOO MUCH SAIL

THERE is one advantage among many possessed by the man who seeks his excitement in the hunting-field, for which he is by no means sufficiently grateful, and which tends much to enhance the enjoyment of his beloved pastime. It is the favourable and perhaps abnormal view his tastes lead him to adopt of the weather. People who are not given to hunting think him mad when, coming down to breakfast on a dark, damp, dismal day, that imparts to everything a gloomy aspect, no less than a raw, cold touch, he exclaims exultingly, "What a charming morning!" In vain they point out that the earth is saturated with wet; the wind in the east; that not only do their own meteorological sensations, such as rheumatism, lumbago, and chronic neuralgia, insist on the propriety of remaining indoors, but that the glass has risen half an inch since last night, denoting the probability of frost, though the sky looks so like snow. The infatuated votary of Diana but rubs his hands more gleefully and goes gallantly in for an additional chop, while he denies himself a second cup of tea. Presently he is seen picking his way to the stables in search of his hack, to gallop off, cheerful, radiant, full of spirits, the only thing out of doors, animate or inanimate, that does not look disgusted with the state of the atmosphere.

It is, however, less with the feelings of the rider than the horse that I am now concerned. The horse—whose instinct so nearly approaches reason; whose generous courage refuses to acknowledge defeat; whose character and temperament are the noblest of the whole animal creation.

Goody Two-shoes, stepping daintily through the deep, poached clay of a narrow gateway, into a yellow, rushy pasture, the surface of which is only varied by a couple of magpies, and a stunted thorn, knows perfectly well why she has been brought out of her warm stable soon after dawn; why she has been fed an hour earlier than usual, and forbidden to quench her thirst freely from the well-known pail; why a

horse-box on the railway has been appropriated to the use of herself and her stable-companion, for whom she manifests unfounded dislike, and a strong inclination to injurious dealings by teeth and hoofs. Lastly, why, after all the alarming joltings and deafening noises incidental to steam conveyance, she has been brought five miles at a foot's pace, with an extraordinary degree of caution, by the smart little groom now perched on her back, and who has ridden her some distance in advance of his fellow-servant, because, to use his own words, "Goody, she do fight and worrit so bad, along o' company."

She is a picture standing there, with her handsome head up, her delicate ears pointed, and a scarlet spot in her nostril, as she spreads it wide and seems to watch with the three senses, of sight, hearing, and smell, for the approach of her maddening friends—the hounds. Dearly she loves them, though with a wild unreasoning, and essentially feminine attachment. Her fine organisation vibrates to their music; her reckless courage rises at their sight. In their company what feat of daring will she not attempt? kept back from them, who can rule her so skilfully but that she will prove a wild cat, a vixen, and a shrew? The beautiful, brown, thorough-bred mare is all afire with excitement; even now, though not a red coat has yet made its patch of colour to the dim, grey landscape, not even a groom, slow, steady, and careful, with his master's favourite, has yet arrived, except her own.

That wise little functionary dismounts in the driest spot he can find, a very miry one, nevertheless, and proceeds with a blue cotton handkerchief to remove the specks of mud from bit, stirrups, saddle-flaps: nay, even in a measure, from the mare herself. Then he takes the curb-chain up a link, the girths a hole; adjusting saddle and bridle with experienced nicety. Meanwhile, Goody Two-shoes winces, kicks, and makes believe to bite. The happy hour is approaching, and she is fit to jump out of her skin from positive delight.

Presently, the glance of her eye, the quiver of her ear denote that she has caught the hoof-tramp of a horse; soon her stable-companion, accompanied by two more hunters, with their dark-coated, neatly booted grooms, makes his appearance; then from another direction, a farmer on a four-year-old approaches at a trot, whilst a cheery laugh, and the slam of a gate behind a neighbouring coppice, denote that the plot is already thickening, and the first scene about to commence. Were she of meaner race, Goody would neigh aloud for joy, but she contents herself with a prolonged snort instead, and

bending her graceful neck, plays a perfect tune on her ringing bridle in sheer gaiety of heart.

Again the eager head goes up. She stands now erect and motionless, save for a ripple of the quivering muscles under her satin skin. Half a mile off, and invisible as yet to eyes unsharpened by excitement, three black caps are bobbing slowly along the far side of a ragged winter hedge; three red coats glance at intervals through its interstices, ere a white dot or two straggle round the corner of the fence into an adjoining field, and the crack of a heavy hunting-whip dwells like a pistol-shot on the still dense atmosphere. Nor is this all. A few early gentlemen, who having had a long distance to ride, are therefore before their time, come galloping up on their covert hacks; and the equanimity of Goody Two-shoes is fairly upset for the rest of the day. By the time the huntsman and his hounds have trotted quietly into the field appointed for the place of meeting, more grooms, more hunters, more sportsmen, on galloping hacks, turn up. A keeper in velveteen with a double-barrelled gun under his arm, rises from some mysterious ambush, and enters at once into confidential relations with the first whip.

A dogcart next arrives, driven by a gentleman who seems to have missed his horse, and whom the nature of the soil precludes from an attempt to leave the lane on wheels. Other carriages, containing ladies well wrapped up, remain on the hard and friendly highway. A chestnut horse with a white leg and a side-saddle appears from behind an outhouse in the corner of the field; a boy on a pony surveys the whole gathering calm and unconcerned, as boys always are in these days, without ever winking once. The meet at Oakover is in the act of taking place, as advertised.

There is nobody to wait for now, but the duke. An important omission certainly, inasmuch as his Grace keeps, manages, and hunts the hounds himself. But with that true politeness which is the offspring of unselfishness and good-nature, this scion of the house of Caradoc never lets his field remember that he "hunts their country for nothing"; and ere the question had been asked, "Have you seen the duke's drag?" a dark-coloured coach, drawn by a handsome team, with many hunting points about them, draws up at the gateway which has been trodden into a perfect slough since Goody Two-shoes passed it first. The duke now hands the ribbons to Walter Brooke, divests himself of his greatcoat, steps lightly on the roller-bolt, and then swings some thirteen stone of handsome, vigorous manhood into the saddle of a

Arrivals.

strong, white-faced brown horse, pushed alongside the coach with much wincing and "lifting," in order that a mount may be effected without soiling his Grace's boots.

It is beautiful to see the rush of the hounds for their huntsman as he passes into the field. Breaking wildly away from rate or whip-crack, with fawning wistful faces, waving sterns, and high, impatient bounds, they dash at the master they love. Countess and Caroline gambol round his horse; Bonnibell throws a silver note for very joy from her unwary tongue, and is instantaneously rebuked for so glaring an impropriety by the second whip; while old Bountiful, presuming on her high character and great elastic powers, reaches the saddle bow at a bound, and fairly licks her lord's face, leaving four muddy footmarks, all close together, imprinted on the white thigh of his well-cleaned leathers.

The duke gathers his reins, feels for his horn, settles himself into a strong hunting seat in the saddle, looks round for the owner of Oakover Gorse, a ruddy, brown-coated old gentleman, who would be unhappy for weeks should it be drawn blank, and with a few endearing expletives scattered amongst his hounds, puts his horse in motion for the covert. There is a simultaneous stir and bustle through the large equestrian assemblage, whereupon Goody Two-shoes, first lashing out at an unoffending pony, rears straight on end and refuses to be pacified.

Walter has mounted Fugleman, and dropped rather behind the cavalcade, for he has seen the chestnut with the side-saddle; and the gorse being half a mile from the place of meeting, he will have plenty of time, he thinks, to secure his usual place for a start. The chestnut is already champing his bit gaily, under the light hand of Lady Julia; and Lord Waywarden, riding a strong, good-looking cob, is impressing on his daughter the necessity of trusting his pilotage over the stiffly enclosed grass country they are likely to cross.

"Don't fuss, dear," says Lady Julia, adding, with an arch smile at Walter, "I can take my own line, and keep it, too, in most things I try. Can't I, Mr. Brooke?"

Walter laughs, and bows, wondering the while why the young lady looks continually about, and behind her, as if in search of some missing object.

"Papa, dear," she adds, after a pause, "don't you think the duke's absurdly punctual this morning? Half the people can't possibly be here. *You* came from St. Barbs, Mr. Brooke, I know. How's the duchess?"

Walter explains that the duchess is still confined to the house, from her cold; and poor Rags, undergoing a most uncomfortable ride on his fretful mare, immediately in front, feels his heart sink down to his boots, for there is no chance of seeing his planet to-day.

As for Goody Two-shoes, her conduct is atrocious. Not satisfied with a flourishing progression sideways, such as the *manége* terms "passaging," and which, besides being wholly uncalled for in large grassfields, is somewhat hazardous in narrow gateways, she exhibits all the caprices of her sex and kind, in opposition to the wishes of her rider. Now she throws that pretty head of hers into his face, at the risk of knocking all the teeth down his throat; now she dashes it wildly between her knees, rasping his knuckles against her breastplate, pulling him fairly over her withers, and causing him to present a larger surface of white leather between the skirts of his hunting-coat than is desirable to those spectators who contemplate him from behind. Lady Julia has a keen sense of the ridiculous; she bursts out laughing.

"Our friend Rags isn't much of a fiddler," she whispers to Walter. "I should suggest a little lighter fingering on the strings, and a good deal more rosin for the bow. If he don't mind his music, that animal will play the whole *fantasia* right through without an accompaniment."

Walter would join in the laugh, but he remembers the three hundred, and refrains.

"The mare has been steeplechased," he explains gravely, "and takes a great deal of riding in a crowd."

"She's a dangerous brute!" exclaims Lord Waywarden, whose own cob is not so amenable as he could wish. "Don't go near her, Julia, I beg of you!"

"Is that the horse you bought of your brother?" asks her ladyship, looking, however, in the contrary direction, and regardless, apparently, of Walter's affirmative, which is so far true that Jack is to have a round sum of money for him when he is paid. She has scanned the horizon in the meantime, and looks rather pale, probably from the exertion, when she turns her head again, and leans over to pat Fugleman's glossy neck with her perfect little hand. "If I had such a horse as that," she says, somewhat excitedly, "I'd feed him every day of his life my own self. I'm not sure I wouldn't dress him as well. At least, I'd do his hair. I know I should take better care of him than you men ever do of your favourites, as you call them! I wonder if you know, any one of you, the value of what you've got!"

The hussar accepts this peroration as most hussars would; but Walter is a person who likes to do one thing at a time, and he is aware that the present situation is little adapted for an interesting avowal, so he contents himself with a tender glance, unfortunately lost on the young lady, who is looking into the far distance straight between her horse's ears.

"Mr. Brooke," she says, after a pause (she likes to repeat his name, making such a soft, melodious word of it; and this, too, he considers, not without reason, is a good sign), "I think I am rather smitten with your friend Rags. I'm sure he's a good fellow, Mr. Brooke. Ask him why he cuts me, out hunting, and tell him to come back and speak to me."

Walter made no objections, for this arrangement suited him exactly. Without being rude or inattentive, he could thus steal quietly to the front, and arrange for Fugleman the good start that gallant horse knew so well how to keep.

Oakover Gorse, you see, was a certainty for a run. There was not another covert to hold a fox within four miles. There was hardly a ploughed field within an equal radius. The grass carried a scent as such districts usually do; and if a man wanted to be comfortably settled with hounds, it was an object to arrive early at a certain brook, of formidable width, three or four fields off, and so get over, if possible, without a *contretemps*.

Walter gave Rags the message with which he had been intrusted; and that hapless equestrian, much flattered by the summons, though somewhat apprehensive as to the means of obeying it, prepared to turn Goody Two-shoes from the course she had adopted, following, as near as her rider would permit, in the wake of the hounds. This retrograde movement, however, was contrary to all her notions of amusement. As well take a girl to a ball, and forbid her to dance! She shook that pretty head worse than ever, reared straight up, and consistently refused to move one yard in the direction required.

Rags was glad to compromise by waiting till Lady Julia should arrive, and even the few seconds that elapsed ere she reached him became a period of severe personal exertion embittered by mental anxiety.

Now, I make no excuse for Lady Julia's conduct, betraying, as it did, an ungenerous disposition to pay off a disappointment of some sort on an unoffending object. The cat, amusing herself with the mouse, has at least this defence, that she stimulates appetite, and means to eat the victim at last. But Lady Julia had no intention, so to speak, of swallowing Rags. It must have been sheer love of mischief

that bade her keep him by her side to the intense irritation of Goody Two-shoes. Neither did Mr. de Rolle, in his heart, care a great deal about the society of her ladyship, for her own sake; but then, she was a friend of the duchess; and in the new career he had vaguely sketched out, even honest Rags had worldly wisdom enough to perceive that the assistance of Lady Waywarden's daughter was not to be despised.

"What a beautiful horse, Mr. de Rolle!" observed this malicious fairy; and while she spoke he could not but allow that her wicked eyes were as bright as diamonds. "What a lovely head, and what perfect action! I'm sure it must be a delightful creature to ride!"

The delightful creature here made a bounce in a lateral direction that jerked its rider's foot out of the stirrup, fortunately on the side farthest from the lady. Rags was by this time perspiring freely, and felt as if he had done a fair day's work already.

"She's—she's good enough when she's once started," said he; "but I'm not quite good enough to ride her. She wants a fellow like Walter there, or his brother Jack, who's a better man still."

The avowal was made breathlessly, and the speaker's hat was over his eyes: nevertheless, Lady Julia liked him for his honesty.

"I thought you could ride anything, Mr. de Rolle," answered this hypocrite, smoothing him down now as craftily as she had intended ruffling him up; "and I always understood Mr. Walter Brooke was one of the best riders in England."

"So he is!" said Rags eagerly; "and I wish he was here now instead of me. But Jack Brooke's better still on a queer horse. He has such nerve, you see, and such light hands, though he is as strong as most horses himself. (Be quiet, Goody!) I think it's his temper, though, that's his great point. They say he's the best tempered fellow in England, and that nobody can put him out!"

"I should like to *try*!" thought Lady Julia, though, of course, she did not express such a sentiment aloud; but she looked very gracious at Rags, and asked him, in a tone of interest and judicious counsel, "why he did not get on his second horse!"

This was exactly what he had intended to do all along, before they should find, only putting off the happy exchange thus far because his brother officers ridiculed his possession of an animal he could not control. His answer, however, died out upon his lips, for, even while it reached them, an electric

thrill seemed to pervade the knot of horsemen clustered by the gorse. A cap was seen held up against the sky, though its owner was hidden by the high-growing evergreens. A heart-beating interval of keen suspense; one shrill, distinct, ear-piercing halloo; the duke's horn blowing short quick notes from the middle of the covert, and Lady Julia was off like wildfire, at a gallop, Lord Waywarden clattering after her on the cob, while Goody Two-shoes plunged and tore madly in their wake, boiling with excitement, and thirsting to get forward for the run.

"This way! Julia! I *insist*!" exclaimed Lord Waywarden, as the girl put her horse's head straight for an ugly blackthorn fence with two ditches, of which the farthest was only to be inferred from a horse's tail and a pair of scarlet skirts revolving in the air. "There's a gate in the corner," he added breathlessly, getting his hand on the rein of his audacious child. "We must make for the lane now. He's over the brook already; and with such a scent as there seems to be this morning, this is no time for larking. Mind, Ju, you're *not* to jump that horse till he's quieter!"

"Oh, papa, Cockamaroo will be so disappointed!" answered Lady Julia, taking her father's advice, however, and swinging along by his side at an easy gallop, her delicate profile looking very pretty under her neat riding-hat; the auburn hair skilfully flattened down in front, and gathered up behind, just leaving the little tip of an ear, with a jewel in it, visible; the taper hands, in delicate yellow gloves, holding their reins with a light, firm touch far back in her lap, so as to give Cockamaroo's head all the liberty compatible with a gentle and persuasive control, while the sweet, round figure in its tight-fitting habit swayed and gave gracefully to every stride of the well-bred, powerful horse.

It was a pity neither of the young gentlemen with whom she had been riding could see her now; but Rags had no attention to spare from his *surveillance* of Goody Two-shoes; while Walter, with a capital start, and Mexico behind him, would not have pulled back of his own free will for any consideration on earth.

Lord Waywarden's knowledge of hunting, and familiarity with the country, now stood him in good stead, though the fine horsemanship and unshaken nerve of twenty years ago were gone, never to return. Lady Julia and her father, diverging considerably from the line of chase, made at once for a convenient ford through the brook, and, cantering over the opposite rise, found themselves far enough in advance to

pull up, and look leisurely on the exciting incidents of the run.

These matters take long to describe, though they are acted out in a very few minutes: nevertheless, measured by sensation, they are sufficiently protracted both for pleasure and for pain. Whilst steadying a good horse over the first two or three fields, under the conviction that he is in for a gallop, a man lives through enough enjoyment to last for a week, and a very short period passed under the same animal, helpless on his back in a ditch, convinces his rider that to calculate time by seconds is an arithmetical fallacy and mistake.

"I said so!" exclaimed Lord Waywarden, whilst his daughter held her breath with delight, for the hounds came streaming down to the water, and swarmed in like bees, stooping to the scent as they emerged, and fleeting on with a faint note of music, but not an instant's pause or intermission. "I said so," he repeated, chuckling. "They'll have plenty of room to-day. I wonder if anybody will have a drive at it, Ju, for, by Jove, it's a bumper!"

The field had a capital start, and some half a score of horsemen had singled themselves out from the rest, to charge the first fence abreast. Of these, three were down, and one had let his horse go. The duke got his hounds out of covert as soon as his fox was well away, with a quickness for which he was indebted to their sagacity and affection. They would fly to his horn no less readily than to the challenge of old Bountiful herself, now speeding along at head, swift, silent, and inexorable as death.

His Grace was out almost alongside of the pack, and, regulating his course entirely by their movements, swung steadily on like clockwork, leaving the brown horse to arrange matters with the fences in any way he pleased, except by refusing them. He and Walter Brooke were the men nearest the hounds when they crossed the second field. How often in those few furlongs the latter changed his mind about letting Fugleman go for three hundred, it is not for me to speculate. Mexico, watching him sailing away at his ease, ridden fairly, though liberally, handled with consummate skill at his fences, and crossing them without exertion, as though an unseen hand lifted and set him down again seven or eight yards farther on, was quite determined to possess so good a horse, and would have offered the money then and there—if he could have caught him! Of such an event there seemed but little chance for another five-and-thirty minutes or so. As he jumped a high flight of rails into the field through which the brook ran Fugleman was

alongside the body of the hounds, and fifty yards ahead of the duke himself. These two seemed the only horsemen inclined to face the water. Swelled by the late rains nearly to its banks, it looked sufficiently forbidding, and it needed but the example of one well-known sportsman to lead every other man out, hastily off, in the direction of the ford. Whilst they hustled down to it, not one of them but confessed in his heart he was wrong, and might as well have stayed at home. Men are apt to be panic-stricken, you see, by water no less than fire. Lady Julia and her father exchanged looks of intelligence. They were speculating on the same event from different points of view.

The young lady spoke first.

"He means to have it! Papa, I knew he would. Look! he's set him going. How well he rides him! I wish I'd a thousand (in gloves) on the event!"

"No hunter in England can jump that water, Ju!" answered his lordship. "He'll break his horse's back, and then he'll be sorry he didn't come with us to the ford."

They saw Walter diverging a little from the line he had hitherto taken. It was obvious that he had marked with his eye the spot at which he meant to try and compass the brook. He leapt Fugleman over the last fence at an awkward place under a tree, but thus obtained a fair, sound headland, with a fall of the ground in his favour, leading straight away to the water's edge. It was the masterly manner in which he gradually increased his horse's pace down this incline that elicited Lady Julia's approbation. Fugleman's ears were pointed and his head up; the wild blood of old Frantic, inherited through Fenella, was boiling in his veins. The gallant animal had no more thought of refusing than his rider, and at the pace they were going, it must be in or over, were the place as wide as the Thames!

"It's even betting! It's five to two! It's a guinea to a shilling," exclaimed her ladyship, waxing more and more enthusiastic, as Fugleman's quick, determined strokes bore him stride by stride towards his effort. She raised her bridle-hand, and moved in the saddle, as if she were riding at the water herself.

"I tell you it's impossible!" answered her father. "Ju, don't be so slangy!"

"It's a monkey to a mouse-trap!" added the young lady, looking demurely in his face. . . . "Papa! the mouse-trap's mine!"

As she spoke, Fugleman landed safely on the farther bank;

made a false step, a short stride, recovered himself, and was away at his long, easy gallop after the hounds once more.

The duke was not quite so fortunate. Riding, as was his custom, very close to his pack, horn in hand, quaffing eagerly at the cup he so loved to drain, and conscious but of one bitter drop in the whole of its contents, namely, the chance that the main-earths might be open at Hatherton Hill, seven miles off, his Grace was unfortunately crossed by a tail hound that had not come away with the rest from the gorse. To save Graceless from destruction, he pulled the brown horse, at an unpropitious moment, out of his stride. The result was a tremendous flounder, a sufficient ducking, and a ludicrous scramble. Nevertheless, both rider and horse got out at the cost of their wetting, and with no further casualty than a pair of boots full of water and a horn full of mud. The latter instrument was mute for the rest of the day, and his Grace's enemies, if he had any, might observe that in so far his fall was conducive to sport.

All this, to use an Irish expression, Lady Julia saw "with the tail of her eye"; but its gaze was still riveted on Walter speeding across a level water-meadow, intersected by deep narrow cuttings, in all the triumph and exultation of being for the moment "alone with the hounds!"

She turned as white as a sheet though, in a moment, and clasped her hands, letting the reins fall on her knee—

"Oh, papa!" she exclaimed. "Poor Fugleman! Let us go and help him!"

Then she caught her bridle up, and galloped down to the nearest gate, thence crossing a low fence into the water-meadow, followed by Lord Waywarden on the cob, that sturdy animal, by the way, blundering on his nose over the obstacle.

Walter was standing by his fallen horse, looking, for once in his life, really dejected and unhappy. Fugleman's hind-legs were still imprisoned by the deep narrow drain into which they had slipped. He was carelessly nibbling the short turf on which his muzzle rested, his ears were all attention, his eye bright and full of vitality, but his back was broken, and alas! the gallant hunter was as good as dead already.

Lady Julia was out of the saddle in a moment. She never asked Walter if he was hurt. She knelt down beside his horse on the wet, sloppy grass. She stroked its nose with her delicate gloved hand, so small and pretty, and useless to help the poor animal; then she turned her head away, and tried hard to prevent their finding out that she was crying.

"but his back was broke"..

"It's no use," said Lord Waywarden, entering into his young friend's feelings with all the sympathy of an old sportsman. "The sooner he is put out of pain the better. It's a hard case, Walter, upon my soul! To get over eighteen feet of water like that, and then break his back in an eighteen-inch drain! Cursed hard, I call it!"

The dandy had by this time recovered his habitual self-possession. He pulled an embroidered case from his pocket, and proceeded to select a cigar with great deliberation, observing coolly—

"The fool had the whole of a fifty-acre field to put his hind-legs wherever he liked, and he must needs leave them in a place not a foot wide. Well, there's an end of him! It's lucky the days are long. I've a goodish walk from here to St. Barbs."

Lady Julia flashed at him a look of indignation that seemed to dry the very tears standing on her cheek. Then she whispered to Lord Waywarden.

"Nothing, Ju," was his answer. "Not all the skill of the Veterinary College. Don't distress yourself, dear. The poor thing is in no pain, and if it were, we can get a gun in less than half an hour. It's the most merciful way. Look! Here are some of the field already!"

Several of that enterprising body now appeared on the scene of action. Amongst them Rags, who had found it hopeless to attempt distinction on the incontrollable Goody Two-shoes, and who, missing his other horse, wisely subsided, without an effort, into the crowd. These gathered like vultures round the dying horse, suggesting all sorts of impossible remedies, Lord Waywarden, in the meantime, sending a friend's groom back in search of the Oakover keeper, with his gun.

"Take my mare, Walter," exclaimed good-natured Rags. "I see my servant coming through the gate. He shall stay till poor Fugleman is destroyed. Why, you'll catch them yet, if you bucket her well, and I'm sure it will do her all the good in the world to take the devil out of her! Jump on, Walter; I never was so glad to get off a horse in my life!"

It was a good-natured offer, and, indeed, under the circumstances there was nothing for it but to accept. Walter mounted Goody accordingly, and the mare seemed to bend her neck at once, and carry herself more discreetly under his light, skilful touch. He looked wistfully after the receding chase, but already even the stragglers were disappearing, and it was hopeless to think of catching them now. Though he pretended not to mind it, Walter did feel a pang when he

reflected that not only had he lost the best horse he ever rode, but the best run he was ever likely to have the chance of seeing again.

For the first time, too, since they found, the recollection of the three hundred, and how it was ever to be paid, flashed across him. He was not a demonstrative man, nor was it his way to swear aloud, but he sent an imprecation back upon his heart that must have curdled all the blood about that organ for more than one pulsation.

It *was* hard to lose such a run. Though some half a dozen sportsmen came up at the first check, and continued with the hounds till the finish, nobody saw it really from end to end but the duke. I may as well give it in his own words, as detailed to the duchess, while his Grace was dressing, in a great hurry, for a large dinner-party at St. Barbs. It was the only half-hour on hunting-days that they could spend together, and she used to make her own magnificent toilet early, to take advantage of it.

"The best thing my hounds have ever had, you old darling, since I took the country. (Chuck me those slippers, and don't let the child in till I've more clothes on.) You see, we found, and went away directly. The beauties all got together, except a couple and a half. That was Ben's fault. He's a willing lad, but slow. They crossed the brook as straight as a bee-line, and scarcely threw their tongues, for the pace they were making. I don't remember such a scent this season. My child, they ran as if they were tipsy. Unfortunately, poor Graceless got between Tarquin's legs and bothered him. The old horse went in a good one! A regular header! Precious cold the water was. A good deal colder than this. (Mind I don't splash that beautiful get-up!) We got out all right, however, though poor Brooke, I hear, killed his horse. Luckily, we had no damages to repair; but Tarquin shook his ears horribly, disgusted beyond measure with his ducking. Well, we came perfectly straight, over the grass, up to Coltsby, the fox going right across the middle of the fields, and the hounds literally racing—Countess and Caroline leading, and poor old Bountiful next. It's the first time she's ever been collared; but they're far and away the best of the litter, and as like old Cruiser as his photograph. However, you won't care to hear all about that, and how right I was to put them forward, though Will advised me not. The run you want to hear about, is it, dear? (Hand me those towels. Mind your skirt against my wet things.) Well, they kept beating me every yard they went. They were half a mile ahead when they

checked, so I can't tell exactly whose fault it is, but I think the young ones had flashed over it. You see, there was *such* a scent, and dead up wind! Two fellows, rabbiting, had turned the fox; however, I was sure Hatherton must be his point, and though my horn was full of mud, and I'd nobody to put them to me, I managed to steady them, and hold them across the turnpike-road by Waterley, in the direction of the Hill. Here Prudish hit off very creditably, over a dry, stoney field (I shall keep Prudish, though her shoulders might be better. She's the last I have of old Pilgrim's blood), and on we went again, almost as merrily as at first. A few fellows had managed to struggle up, amongst them Jack. I wasn't sorry to see him, for though mine are a handy pack of hounds as any in Europe, I can't do much with neither a horn nor a servant. (Give me one of those neckcloths, dear; the white one.) After this, it was plain sailing, almost to the finish. They hunted him at a good holding pace, by Eversley and Pelton, and across the London road, nearly to Marberry, turning as if they were tied to him, and giving Jack and me nothing to do but keep our spurs going and look on. A beautiful sight they were as they swung down Hollingburn Ridges and across the open, again pointing for the Hill. (Now, the waistcoat, mamma, and let the young one in.) 'It's worth a guinea a minute, your Grace!' says Jack to me, just under Hollingburn House, with his face as red as a turkey-cock's, and his horse's neck stiff. 'I'd give more than that for two fresh horses,' was my answer. 'He can't stand before them much longer at this pace, were he the stoutest fox that ever was bred.' I had hardly spoken, before I viewed him turning away from the Hill. He couldn't face it, poor devil! and he sank the wind for Wildwood. I think he made up his mind in a moment to try and get there, for I never hunted a gamer fox. Here a flock of sheep had crossed his line, and the scent failed all at once. If I could have blown my horn, or Jack could have raised a trot, I should have held them over it. As it was, old Bountiful picked it out beautifully, and we got on terms with him through some heavy ploughs, where three couple of the young ones came out and did all the work. I fancy this finished Jack's horse, for he never showed again. I was almost afraid now we should get to the Forest, and he might beat us, after all; but they stuck to him over the meadows by Ripplesby in a way that looked very like blood, and he began to run short amongst the small enclosures on old Welter's farm. By the way, young Welter went very well on a grey horse that would carry me. I viewed the fox twice in and out of a double hedgerow, by the orchard, and I could

have killed him five minutes sooner, but that Fearless and Frolic led all the others wrong by running heel, and Welter, who had no thong to his whip, couldn't stop them. However, it's their first season, and though they were as wild as hawks, they were as fresh as fire. It's undeniable blood, no doubt. When I got them back to me, I met him at the corner of the hedgerow, but he whisked through, once more putting his head straight for the Forest, and they fairly ran into him in the open, just below Norman's Cross, nine miles from Oakover, as the crow flies, and exactly one hour and five minutes from the moment old Bountiful opened in the gorse, with but one check to speak of, and not a hound, except Graceless, missing at the finish.

"Poor Tarquin was very glad it was over, and indeed I think you may say it was something like a run.

"Why didn't we come home? Well, you see, the hounds were pretty fresh, and we got the second horses, and it wasn't two o'clock, so I thought a good rattling would do Wildwood no harm, and I spent the afternoon in the Forest with about as bad a fox as I ever had the pleasure of hunting, even down there. However, I brought *his* nose home too, and altogether, I think it's been the finest day's sport I ever had since I kept hounds. You see— Good gracious, there's dinner! I forget who's coming. Which of those old women am I to take in? Run down, there's a dear, and tell them I won't be half a minute behind you."

It is needless to add that his Grace was as good as his word, gave his arm to the oldest peeress in every sense, and ate his dinner with the appetite of a man who has passed eight hours of hard exercise and happy excitement in the open air.

While the duke was finishing his fine run, and long before he plunged into the soaking rides and interminable depths of Wildwood, for the afternoon, Walter was riding Goody Two-shoes by Lady Julia's side, as far as their respective roads home lay together.

Lord Waywarden had hunted too many years to undertake the labour in vain of hanging on the skirts of a really good thing, in the wild hope of ever reaching the performers till it is over; and although several of the field, with Rags amongst them, persisted in the fruitless task, he impressed on his daughter, with considerable emphasis, the propriety of a speedy return, and a saving of their horses for another day.

Walter was in low spirits, no doubt, though he affected to make light of his casualty. He was fond of his horse. Some

men whose hearts seem curiously hard in all other relations of life are capable of strong attachment to animals. I believe he almost loved Fugleman. Besides, he had calculated on him so confidently for extrication from his difficulties; and now, instead of being cheap at three hundred, he was not worth thirty shillings. Of all times, too, he could ill afford to lose him just at present. Still, I am of opinion that now, while his blood was yet stirring, and his manlier nature aroused by the excitement of the last half-hour, the pang he felt most keenly was when he pictured to himself the dangling head-collar, and the empty stall at home.

As he turned in his saddle for a last look to where his poor horse lay, he saw the keeper with the gun under his arm, hastening down towards the brook. Then Walter shuddered visibly, and his lip twitched. Lady Julia observing his compunction, forgave him his heartlessness of a few minutes ago.

Women are the best consolers, after all. Their tact is so fine, their sympathy so intuitive. They neither pull a long face, and remind you by mute stupidity of a sorrow they might just as well dilate on in polysyllables, nor do they jar all your sensibilities by trying to rouse you into mirth, with efforts about as judicious as those of the ship's steward who brings you boiled leg of mutton and caper sauce to tempt your appetite when you are seasick. They err in neither extreme; but they summon the resources of their delicate minds, their soft voices, and their fine eyes, to put you on better terms with yourself, and consequently with everything in the world, including the affliction from which you bleed. Lady Julia understood this as well as most other offices of her sex, and made herself so pleasant, and looked so remarkably pretty all the while, that Walter, though by no means a susceptible person, and disposed, moreover, to gauge all women by the standard of Mrs. Major Shabracque, began to acknowledge something like the old foolish feeling stirring at his heart once more.

He admitted she was pretty; he considered she was agreeable; he knew she was high bred, and he had heard she would have thirty thousand pounds. Several vague ideas that had been floating through his brain for some weeks began to assume a less indefinite form. I do not mean that he contemplated laying serious siege to the young lady, and going to her father with the cool proposal: "Give me your daughter and her fortune in return for my irreproachable exterior, doubtful character, and expectations of—*nothing*." But he thought of what might be; of a home; of true affection;

of children; of something better than this gaudy, empty, unsubstantial life; this wide and ever shifting circle, of which, under its varying conditions, the centre was always self.

The young lady saw he was in distress, while trying hard to conceal it. She liked him the better for this feeling, and the effort. Perhaps she had reasons of her own for thus sympathising with the sorrows of others; perhaps she was not thoroughly happy and heart-whole herself.

Be that as it might, her manner was unusually soft and kind during their ride. She neither mocked at, nor ridiculed anybody, for five whole miles. He was almost sure she pressed his hand when he took leave at the cross-roads, where they parted. Her late presence seemed to shed a glow over him during the rest of his solitary journey. He felt soothed; he felt comforted, notwithstanding poor Fugleman; he could have felt almost happy, had it not been for that doubly accursed three hundred.

CHAPTER XV

DRIFTING TO LEEWARD

A LUNCHEON party in a great country-house is about the pleasantest meal of all. The guests are just hungry enough to be in good humour. Some of them have not been many hours out of their rooms. Even those who came down earliest are not yet jaded with the efforts of the day. Breakfast is well enough for quiet young people, whom nothing can subdue, or very old ones, who are obliged to take care of themselves, and so privileged to retire to bed early; but for the middle-aged, the weary, the over-worked, it is no such easy matter to resume at ten the flow of spirits required over-night, to last till two a.m. It is against the grain that a pale face is dressed in smiles, a jaded appetite tempted with hot *salmis de gibier*, and a relaxed nervous system braced up once more for the give-and-take contest of epigram, banter, and repartee. Women, I think, bear the reaction better than men. If incapable of such strenuous efforts, they can remain, so to speak, under arms longer than ourselves. We are apt to pine for the easy dressing-suit, the slippers, the arm-chair, the cup of tea cooling at our elbow, the soothing weed burning slowly between our lips. We have not their energy, their persistence, their spirit of emulation; above all, we feel the want of the noble and sustaining influence of dress. Therefore it is that at breakfast we are dull, pointless, sodden, glad to come down late, and escape observation; unequal to a romp with the children of the house, and somewhat irritated by the stalwart domestic who persists in believing we can eat of every dish, both before the fire and on the side tables. But let us elude over-much civility and attention, get into a snug corner with the newspaper, or a sheltered walk in the shrubbery, to smoke and talk honest male scandal with a comrade, arrive at the sanctum of our bed-chamber, to find the devastation of the housemaids has swept over it, and passed away, write our letters, admonish our servant, skim that article in the *Saturday Review* which

we pretended last night we had read (if not written), and when two o'clock comes, and a great bell above the stables rings out its summons, behold, our weapons are pointed, our corslet laced; we are a giant refreshed, prepared for attack, defence, charge, skirmish, or *sortie*, thrust and *riposte*, "hob nob, give it, or take it."

The ladies, too, appreciate their luncheon thoroughly. The hours of eating for the human subject are a mere question of habit, and a healthy appetite is the most infallible of timekeepers. I know not why our beautiful companions confine themselves to a morsel of toast and a cup of tea in the morning, to a pigeon cutlet, a cubic inch of jelly, two glasses of champagne, and a spoonful of ice at night; but practising such self-denial it seems only fair that they should go in for a full meal at two o'clock; and so they do, and much good it does them. Charming and delightful as they are at all times, when are they so charming, so delightful, sympathising, and so affable, as during the subsequent hour or so ere the influence of good cheer and a glass of brown sherry has entirely passed away? This is a long dissertation on luncheons; but it may serve to explain why Walter Brooke should have cantered Goody Two-shoes merrily along, with the hope of reaching St. Barbs in time for that sociable repast.

A man's whole life often turns upon the merest trifle—nay, upon a trifle in no way connected with himself, or under his own control. If the duchess's cold had not been a little better, and yet not well enough to admit of accompanying her husband on the coach to Oakover; if the unpromising morning had not brightened into a finer day than could have been expected; if Lady Goneril had not fancied herself smitten with a literary lion, three parts dandy and one part author, therefore desirous of being intellectual, and archæological, and *blue*, Walter Brooke's afternoon would have been filled up with a round of sufficiently harmless amusement, and this chapter need never have been written.

But thus it came to pass that our ill-fated sportsman, though he rode his friend's mare an honest twelve miles an hour, had the whole of St. Barbs entirely to himself on his return.

Lady Goneril, having waded through a sentimental chapter of her lion's last work, liking it none the less that, in common with the general public, she could not understand two consecutive lines, had betaken herself to a portfolio of prints, and very handsome she looked in the process of

turning them over, though, as there were only ladies in the morning-room, this was a matter of no importance. Amongst these etchings was one of a fine old ruin, called Norman's Cross, which much captivated her fancy, chiefly, I imagine, on account of a stone tracery round the arch that she thought would furnish a killing pattern for collars. An exclamation of delight brought the duchess to her side, and that good-natured hostess at once proposed a visit to the original.

"My dear, would you like to see it? It's within a drive. We'll have luncheon an hour earlier, and start."

Both proposals met with a warm approval. The advancement of luncheon would shorten the morning; the expedition would employ the afternoon. The great object of killing time would be effected, and Lady Goneril's reputation as a *bas-bleu* would henceforth stand upon a pedestal.

So the bell rang, and the groom of the chambers appeared, the most deferential of men: an order was then transmitted through a variety of channels to reach the stables at last. The coachman was directed to produce the barouche, the sociable, and a dogcart for some of the gentlemen, while the stud-groom, who disapproved of the whole proceeding, bearing, as it did, in no way on the all-important business of the chase, was required to furnish two quiet saddle-horses and a pony, for certain timid equestrians. Thus, when Walter had changed his hunting things for the garments of civilised life, the whole party had been gone more than an hour.

If luncheon be an enjoyable meal when eaten in public with pleasant company, at the pleasantest time of the day, it is by no means exhilarating when you sit down alone, in a room of some sixty feet by twenty, waited on by two decorous men in black, and three or four attentive giants in livery, the whole force watching every mouthful you eat, and scarcely permitting you to put salt on your plate for yourself. Walter soon bolted a slice of ham and a glass of sherry; then he returned to his room, drew an arm-chair to the fire, and proceeded to review his position calmly, and determine what must be done.

His difficulties, like all others of a pecuniary nature, grew more and more appalling the longer he looked at them. The troubles of the heart console themselves with meditation; the troubles of the intellect vanish when you grapple them; but the troubles of the purse, so boldly staved off, so easily ignored when the mind is otherwise occupied, increase and multiply in an alarming ratio when you encounter them face to face, and put them down in black and white.

He had fairly come to the utmost limit of his resources. Three sovereigns and a half-crown lay on his dressing-table. When he had paid his groom's book, and tipped De Rolle's man, who would presently arrive with poor Fugleman's saddle and bridle, to take the mare back, he would literally not have a shilling left. Suppose they played pool before dinner, and he could not purchase a sixpenny life! It was too ridiculous! He laughed aloud at the idea; but it was a bitter laugh, with very little of mirth in it. Then he blamed his father for putting him into so expensive a regiment; his brother Jack —for what? Not for refusing to help him? No, Jack had always behaved like a trump, he must allow; but he blamed him for not giving him better advice. He blamed everyone but himself, the fool that cut those drains in the water-meadow included; and, by degrees, he brought himself to think that he was an ill-used man, that all the world had turned against him; that he was authorised to prey upon that world in self-defence. This was a speculative theory, leading to a vast number of considerations. Amongst others, he remembered how he had backed Benedict for the Great Middlesworth Handicap, "getting on," as it was termed, at a happy moment, namely, when an enterprising public believed the horse to have been injured by a railway accident, and he knew better, through information he had paid for. There was nothing dishonourable in this, far from it! Such chances were not to be thrown away. It was part of the system, diamond cut diamond, and woe to the dullest diamond in the ring! If Benedict should pull it off, he would be set on his legs again; he turned over the pages of his betting-book, and cast up the amount that he would clear. It reached a good many hundreds. Then he thought of the horse's fine form and racing qualities, of his previous performances; above all, of the money he carried, and the parties whose interest it was that he should win. It looked like a certainty. To be sure he had seen a good many certainties bowled over, but this would surely prove an exception. Then he would be on velvet once more. Set up for the summer, quartered at Hounslow, commanding the detachment at "The Gate," what might he not effect with his advantages and his *entrée* into London society? He might marry Lady Julia—he might sell out. His troop would be worth a good deal of money. To be sure, he had not purchased it yet, but that, of course, must be arranged somehow by the family. He would have a pretty house in Belgravia, an easy appointment under Government, or a place about the Court, he didn't care

which; and the nicest little wife in London. How well she looked to-day on horseback, and how sorry she seemed to be about Fugleman. Oh, it was clear the girl liked him, though, to be sure, there was nothing surprising in that! Yes, he seemed to see his way before him, if he could but get over the next few weeks. Then he started up, and split a large coal that slumbered on the fire with vicious energy, for he remembered the bill coming due, and how acceptable the money would be now that he had fooled away at whist on the railroad.

As he sat down again and watched the crackling of the scattered coal, a certain hard, evil expression settled on his handsome face. A dogged, sullen look, half shame, half obstinacy, such as the pickpocket wears walking to the station between two policemen, such as the death-cap covers when the culprit's face is veiled for the last time by the hangman's hand. If Walter could have seen himself at that moment in the glass, he would not have recognised the pleasing exterior by which he set such store; he would have wondered how the aristocratic features, the manly countenance, could look so vile, so base, so low; he would have pondered and hesitated, and shrank from a measure after which he could never feel like a gentleman again.

Though he heard a step in the passage, and knew perfectly well whose it was, he started, and his heart leaped to his throat, when a smart double knock announced a visitor at the door. His "Come in" was dry and hoarse. Though the room was large and airy, he passed his hand twice across his brow to wipe off the perspiration, and he walked to the window and looked out, that the dapper little personage who entered might not see his face.

It was no other than De Rolle's second horseman appearing, as in duty bound, to report poor Fugleman's destruction; to inquire if there were further orders, and to accept the gratuity which he knew was forthcoming from so "free-handed a gentleman as Mr. Brooke."

He looked wonderfully short and sturdy off a horse, smoothing his sleek head, standing respectfully, half in, half out of the lofty doorway, and exhaling a strong whiff of that "otto of stables" which never fails to cling about the persons of such functionaries.

"I've brought the saddle and bridle home, sir," he began, with a proper attention to business first, "an' guv of them to your servant here. The duke's bailiff, sir, he offered me a cast in his gig as far as the Lodge. The mare have been

wisped over, an' had a mouthful of gruel. Would you please to give any more orders, afore I take her home?"

The little man looked everybody straight in the face when he spoke. It struck him now, as Walter turned from the window, that the latter must have been shaken by his fall, or perhaps he was sorry for his horse, he seemed so pale and nervous, and unlike himself.

"There's no hurry," said he, still speaking with a dry mouth; "the mare's done nothing, and you needn't be afraid of trotting her quietly home. Did you see my horse shot?"

"Never left him till all was over," answered the other solemnly. "A peaceful ending the poor thing made too. Just shivered, and gave out. He couldn't have lived you know, sir," he added more cheerfully, "an' he did his dooty whilst you owned of him—uncommon, to be sure!"

Walter seemed inclined to delay the man's departure, and put one of the sovereigns off the dressing-table in his hand. Something in the act, though, must have roused the donor's energies, for he said, roughly and sharply—

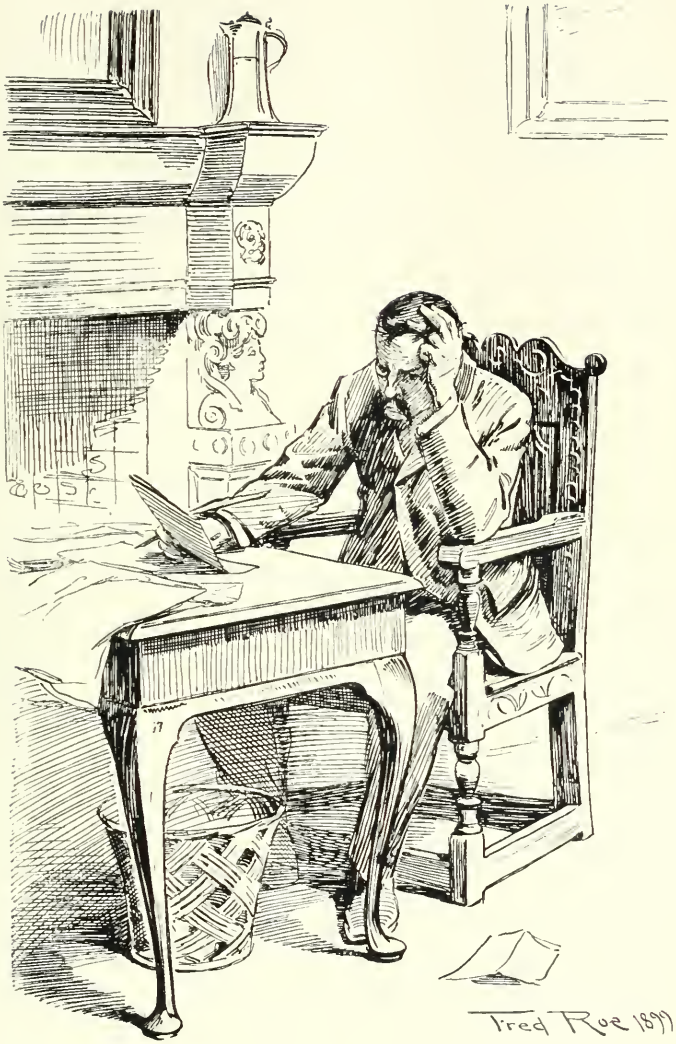
"I shall have a letter for your master; come again in a quarter of an hour."

It was no use putting it off. If it *must* be done, better do it, without time for further hesitation.

His face cleared, and his whole exterior resumed its wonted appearance, now that he had made up his mind. Drawing a chair to the table, which the duchess's hospitable care had supplied with pens, ink, paper, and envelopes, in every variety; but opening his own despatch-box for the materials, he wrote off the following letter, hardly once lifting his hand from the sheet:—

My dear Rags,—I have been more annoyed to-day than I can express. Not about poor Fugleman, though that, as you know, is a loss I shall not easily replace. He was quite the best horse I ever had. It is another matter, however, which I have just learned, that places me in an extremely unpleasant position, and were it not that I am concerned with so old and intimate a friend as yourself, I should be at my wits' end how to act. The case is simply this:—

You remember, some little time ago, being kind enough to attach your signature, merely as a matter of form, to a bill of mine for three hundred pounds (£300)? That bill, by to-day's post, has been returned to me. It seems that in our joint inexperience and ignorance of business, we had drawn it on a stamp of insufficient value for so large a sum. It should have been a three, and not a two shilling stamp. This, of course, rendered the bill valueless; and as I had already calculated on discounting it, I should be nicely "in the hole" if I could not produce another for the same amount, with the same names, but drawn in more regular form. That favour I should have no scruple in asking you, as it is merely a confirmation of the first, but for one consideration, and this is what vexes me more than anything in the whole business: *I cannot return you the original bill*, and you must take my bare word for its being destroyed. You



A Shameful Letter

know how sensitive people are apt to be in such matters ; and although you are good enough to compliment me on my imperturbability, even I can sometimes be a good deal put out. I was so provoked at the bother and mismanagement of the whole thing, that I threw the protested bill, from sheer temper, into the fire, and did not remember till it was burnt that it was indispensable I should return it to *you*. It is too late now to do anything of the kind, and my only course is to enclose you a fac-simile of the original bill, drawn on a proper stamp, and to beg of you to scrawl your name across it as before, when I can promise you shall have no more trouble or annoyance about the business. If possible, let me have it by return of post.

If you ever caught the hounds to-day, you must have had a capital thing. The duke's first horse has not yet come back, so I conclude they ran far and straight.

What a scent there was, and what fun I had for those few fields before that sad disaster ! My poor horse must have covered an enormous distance at the brook. I shall never have such a water-jumper again !

The duchess asked after you last night. If I am here next week, I fully expect we shall come over together.—And believe me, my dear Rags, faithfully yours,

W. Brooke.

St. Barbs.

The Martyrdom of St. Fugleman !

Twice was he visited with sore and shameful compunction in the concoction of this precious epistle. Strange to say, these qualms arose from the two minor falsehoods he used to support and bolster up the great lie pervading the whole. He did not like to affirm that he had received letters by that day's post contrary to the fact ; and he hated himself for telling Rags the duchess had asked after him, when her Grace had certainly omitted to do so. These circumstantial perversions, though indispensable to the success of his scheme, he deplored as such ; but by some strange warped process of reasoning, he persuaded himself that the re-duplication of the bill was less an act of positive swindling than an unfortunate financial necessity, not perhaps exactly on the square, yet neither strictly dishonest, inasmuch as its results were not eventually intended to impoverish the victim.

It could do Rags no harm, he argued, and could make no difference to him, that he should incur a liability for six hundred, instead of three, provided he was not called upon to pay it up. This he had resolved his friend should never be asked to do. He had intended all along to stand between Rags and loss. It was but a temporary accommodation, after all. He would do twice as much for Rags if their positions were reversed. Pshaw ! what a fool he was to make such a fuss about it !

The quarter of an hour had long since elapsed—nay, had grown into more than four times that period, under the genial influence of cold meat in the servants' hall, and the

best ale (meaning the strongest) brewed in the county—ere De Rolle's groom thought it time to tighten his mare's girths and put her bridle on for their homeward journey. Having completed his arrangements, and turned her round, ready for a start, he sought the house, and tapped at Walter's door once more. The letter was lying, sealed and directed, on the table.

For one short minute the whole tendency of the writer's life and education, the impulses and instincts of a gentleman, had prompted him to throw the fatal sheet into the fire, and he had better have held it with his naked hand between the bars till the flesh peeled off his fingers, than turned a deaf ear to the call of honour urging him by all that he held most valuable to turn back while there was yet time. But, alas! that honour will not always supply the place of principle. The instincts and the impulses of a gentleman, even backed by superstition of race and prestige of position, will not always hold their own against the assaults of keen temptation, or the pressure of unyielding necessity. A man may need something more than these to restrain him even from that which a somewhat inconsistent code denounces as a crime. He cannot stand alone. If he has no stronger hand to lean on than his own, who shall ensure him from a fall that must eventually work out sin and sorrow, and inevitable shame? Let him put perfect confidence in his bodily powers and mental resources. Let him never shrink from danger, nor be afraid of work. But let him beware of dependence on his own fortitude under temptation; let him shrewdly mistrust such accommodating counsellers as his passions and his heart.

Walter had the letter in his hand, and was close to the fireplace, when he heard the carriages that brought the ladies back from their expedition grinding the gravel at the front door. His scruples vanished at the sound. He could not, he *would* not, give up this life of excitement and social success for the want of a few miserable sovereigns. The thing was done, and he would take his chance.

He had rather not face that honest little man again though, with his fearless eyes. He walked down to the library, rang the bell, bade the deferential groom of the chambers inform Mr. de Rolle's servant there was a letter for his master upstairs, and fell to reading an interesting article on polygamy in a weekly paper, without understanding one word.

So Goody Two-shoes carried the letter back to the

barracks, and Walter Brooke's spurs were off, and his coat-of-arms defaced, henceforth for evermore.

The ladies came into the library for tea, and the disgraced knight, always a favourite with the women, had little leisure for brooding over his dishonour. They rustled round him, and petted him, and sorrowed for his mischance, scolding him prettily for the unfeeling manner in which he related it, and asking him a thousand questions, betraying the wildest ignorance of the subject, as to how it came to pass. They had their own story also to impart; for, approaching Norman's Cross, where, it will be remembered, the duke had killed his fox, they met Tarquin coming home in that state of dignified exhaustion which marks the hunter after a hard day; and so they doubled the distance, and exaggerated the importance of the run; whereupon Walter, whose character for riding stood high enough to admit of such coquetries, vowed he was very glad to have been out of it; and they scolded him, and laughed at him, and petted him all the more.

Lady Goneril was in raptures about the ruin. She was even going to read it up in the county history, and would probably be puzzled not a little at the concise manner in which that erudite work condensed some two centuries of important events into half a dozen lines, to explain the first destruction and subsequent restoration of the edifice.

"You see, I adore everything old, Mr. Brooke," said her ladyship, assuming her most becoming attitude, as she stretched across him for some tea. "Old plate, old china, old carving, old pictures, old lace"—

"Old gentlemen?" asked Walter simply. Whereat the duchess, and Mrs. Wimbrel, and the two Misses Mallard laughed melodiously, for Lord Goneril was at least thirty years in advance of his wife.

"*Young* gentlemen, I think," answered her ladyship, smiling sweetly, "but *old* friends." Then she sighed, and turned her large eyes down to her teacup, because it was her rôle just at present to be absent and melancholy, and *incomprise*; altogether a waif and a wounded spirit, and out of place in a heartless world. She had assumed this character now nearly a fortnight, and was already rather tired of it, but having brought it with her to St. Barbs, it must last out the visit, just like her morning and evening dresses. For the next place she went to, of course, she could order fresh ones.

There are some men, and those, I imagine, not the most unpopular with the other sex, whom no woman ever thinks of

marrying. Whether it is that they consider business and pleasure essentially separate concerns, or that the observances expected from an admirer are so different from the qualities required in a husband, I know not; but they often take a pleasure in the society of the former, all the keener that they never seem to contemplate the possibility of his becoming the latter. I think I have already said that Walter was established amongst them by tacit consent as a man to be monopolised of no one in particular; and when the youngest Miss Mallard, an impulsive, handsome, romantic girl, in her first season, showed symptoms of a preference for this contraband article, the *douane* interfered at once. I have not the least idea—how should I?—to what private ordeal the victim was subjected; how the inquisition, numbering among its familiars her sister and nearest relations, pressed out the drop of heresy from her blood. The torture, I believe, is usually merciless, mysterious, and protracted; but in this case it was to all appearance effectual. The youngest Miss Mallard never looked at Walter now, and very seldom spoke to him; but she was devoted to little Lord Caradoc, and had the little child in her lap at this moment, with his chubby hands buried in the wealth of her brown, beautiful hair. She had told Mr. Brooke this afternoon she was sorry for his horse; but though this was the only sentence she addressed to him the whole day, it was spoken so coldly as to seem almost unkind.

It was resolved, then, by a jury of matrons, that Walter was to be appropriated by nobody, though everybody felt entitled to share the attentions of so general a favourite. Lady Goneril would have been even more gracious, but that she went for clever people, just at present, and whatever faults he had, nobody could accuse him of such a social offence as superiority of intellect. Mrs. Wimbrel, whose age and experience might have taught her better, vowed "she doated on Mr. Brooke; he was so quiet, so reckless, so good-natured, and *so* good-for-nothing!" The eldest Miss Mallard, though she remonstrated with her sister, showed her teeth and flourished her shoulders at him on every opportunity. All the others followed suit; and even the frank, out-spoken, warm-hearted duchess, pleasant and kindly to all her guests alike, warned the duke, point-blank, that there were two or three of their country neighbours whom she would *not* undertake to entertain, unless he asked Walter Brooke!

Of course, the duke did as he was told. Her word was law, as it ought to be, for theirs seemed a lifelong romance; and he liked the hussar besides, on his own account, summing

him up usually with an admission that "the fellow can ride, I must say, like a bird! Though I don't think he's much idea of what hounds are doing."

Therefore, her Grace cross-examined him as to his future engagements, without reserve. "You know you're due here the week after next, Mr. Brooke," said she, poising the teapot in her hand. "You must not throw us over as you did last time, with some ridiculous excuse about an inspection. You'll meet your dear neighbours, the Waywardens, and Julia—I know you'd go any distance to meet Julia."

A howl from the Earl of Caradoc here broke in on the conversation—Bessie Mallard having upset hot tea into his poor little shoes and stockings. Mamma could alone administer consolation under such a catastrophe; and a pair of fat legs and innocent dimpled feet were forthwith laid bare, and dried by a variety of lace-embroidered handkerchiefs, to be afterwards chafed in her Grace's own white hands before the fire. Bessie Mallard, too, fell down at the Infant Martyr's knees with great penitence. The small round tea-table was pushed away from the hearth-rug. A crimson cushion rested on the low steel fender. The boy's golden curls were scattered over his mother's folds of deep-coloured velvet, glowing in the firelight. Graceful heads bent around him, and jewelled fingers busied themselves with his wants. Stately women, in their rich dark dresses, converged on that struggling little patch of white, and Walter's handsome figure towered above the group. It was quite a *tableau* when the other gentlemen came in. More kindness—more condolences—more friendly outbreaks of sorrow and goodwill. Last of all, when he went to dress, a message from the duke, who had just returned—"His Grace's compliments—so sorry to hear about the horse. Would mount Mr. Brooke to-morrow at Pelton Pastures, on two of his own!"

And if they had known—if they had only suspected the truth—not one of these genial, open-hearted, good fellows, but would have crossed the street to avoid meeting him; not one of these kindly, pleasant, sympathising women, but would have gathered up her skirts, and fled away, to avoid the contamination of his presence.

In vain he strove to deaden the sense of shame with gaiety, or to drown it in wine. In vain he talked, and laughed, and flirted, and was better company than usual. He felt that the mark was branded in now, and would never leave him whilst he lived; that no display could effectually hide it, nor all the wine in the duke's cellars wash it out. At nine, he calculated,

Rags must receive the letter. Bessie Mallard, I imagine, was the only person who noticed how a shadow, as of intense pain, once crossed his face, when he looked at a clock on the chimneypiece. She was sorry for him, wondering simply what ailed him, and sighing gently in her own white bosom while she turned her eyes away.

Notwithstanding, perhaps in consequence of, the *octroi*, she still set him up in secret for an idol, exalted, pure, irreproachable, without a flaw. Could she have seen the rift that cracked this spurious metal from head to heel, would she have spurned it beneath her feet, or grovelled down beside it in the dust, seeking a yet lower level that she at least might look up to it once more for her own private worship alone? She had a woman's rigid standard of honesty—a woman's keen sense of honour. It would have been a sore trial either way.

CHAPTER XVI

COLD COMFORT

EVERYBODY knows how soon people make up their minds to the inevitable. I have been told that a man under sentence of death becomes perfectly reconciled to his fate in about a quarter of an hour. That he feels as if he had been prepared, and intended to undergo this ordeal, for years; and had never thoroughly and essentially belonged to the living world outside.

I think I have observed in mankind a singular faculty of adaptation to either fortune. The beggar on horseback soon relapses into as steady a trot as if he had been in the saddle all his life. Dives destitute, accepts with the condition, the consolations of Lazarus, and eats his crumbs with zest, making the most of them the very first time he is hungry. When he has nothing left but rags to cover him, and sores perhaps beneath the rags, he forgets, as if they had never been, the fragrant locks, and the supple skin, the bath and the perfumes, the purple and fine linen of his former state. Sometimes he bears privation even better than Lazarus, who is born to it. One who knew human nature well, though, alas! he too often turned it the seamy side without, has observed that rich men reduced to poverty are less impatient of their lot than those who have never known the advantages (and the cares) attendant on wealth and position. The golden apples are indeed very tempting when seen from outside the garden-wall: but go in, by surmounting the spikes, or creeping under the gate, according as your temperament leads you to choose between rent garments and dirty hands; fill your pockets with the apples, and your bosom, and your mouth; you will admit that here too you have been deceived, and that the Garden of Paradise you have all your life been seeking must lie yet somewhere farther on.

The path to the real garden is steep and narrow enough, but none can justly call it flinty to tread, or hard to find, being indeed easiest to travel when the wayfarer is weakest

and weariest, being never seen so plainly as through a mist of tears. There are many guides, too, rising at every turn, on purpose to help you along the way. Courage, with noble brow; faith, with broad, firm breast; gratitude, with full heart and loving smiles; but sorrow there, with the wasted cheek and the hollow eyes, is safest and surest of all. Her hand is like a vice round your wrist; it chills you to the bone; but its grasp is a giant's to sustain. The others encourage you well enough to confront the perils of the journey—to ford its rivers, to leap its chasms, to break through its briers and thorns; but she alone keeps you steadily to the path, forbidding you, with those mournful eyes, to leave it for a hair's breadth, though the ripe fruit blushes to meet your thirsty gaze, and the dewy flowers drown your senses in a flood of fragrance that seems to rush in from the depths of Long Ago.

She had got Philip Stoney fast by the arm, as she led him across Middlesworth Bridge, on a farewell expedition for which his better reason could find no excuse; yet on which he dwelt, nevertheless, as the one gleam of comfort in his clouded and still darkening day.

What advantage a man gains by gaping at the four walls of a building, I have never yet been able to discover; but that the process, though unreasonable, must be refreshing, I cannot conscientiously continue to doubt! Middlesworth Bridge looked very calm and peaceful in the early spring sunshine; for though it was but little past Valentine's Day in England, the sun had actually appeared. The cattle in those fertile water meadows, late risers enough, were on the move, feeding sluggishly, with their heads all the same way. The sedges moaning wistfully as usual, seemed yet to whisper something of life and hope, and better times to come, at least so Philip thought; it may be only because a brisk walk made the blood course through his veins, and circle warmer round his stout, honest, faithful heart. Birds were always chirping in leafless hedges, and snowdrops plentifully sprinkled its surface, where the copse had been cut over into sharp-pointed stubs. With all its promise, why is there something melancholy in the spring? I can understand the fall of the leaf suggesting to a sensitive fancy man's obvious destiny, his maturity, the fulfilment of his promise, the commencement of his decay; but though I can feel, I cannot analyse a sentiment that bids the renewed year welcome, with a greeting in which a nameless longing sorrow has its part no less than a natural hopeful joy. I can understand,

though I cannot explain, the mood in which one of the noblest poems in the language pours forth its sad, melodious, and suggestive wail—

> And when I saw the Spring
> Come forth her work of gladness to contrive,
> With all her reckless birds upon the wing,
> I turned from all she brought to those she could not bring.

Philip Stoney's life was completely changed. His whole prospects were ruined by the fire that destroyed the very foundations on which the prosperity of Stoney Brothers had been built. A few weeks, nevertheless, sufficed to reconcile him, in outward appearance at least, to the hardships of his lot. The past seemed at an immeasurable distance now. Sometimes he could hardly believe in the reality of those happy years, with their engrossing labours, their social meetings, their pleasant recreations. No more picnics now; no more gallops with the duke; no more covert shooting at Bridlemere. Was it possible that all these changes could have taken place in the few weeks since the Middlesworth ball? That Middlesworth ball seemed the only reality left; through all his troubles, labours, and distresses, he found himself thinking of it night and day. The remembrance was like a ray of sunshine streaming across a dismal prison cell. Sometimes, in his less desponding moods, it is the one bright blessing of the captive's lot; sometimes, in his longing thirst for liberty, it seems the bitterest drop in the cup he has to drain. Yet even when most he chafes at its mocking contrast, he would not for his life forego one single particle of the mote-dust that dances in its golden beam. Philip prized the remembrance of that one night the more that he must make up his mind now never to look in the sweet pale face, and meet the dark serious eyes again.

He could put his shoulder to the wheel, and was the last man on earth to sit in the mud praying Hercules for help. He arranged the affairs of the firm lucidly, judiciously, and honestly, before he thought of himself. He even settled matters in the most advantageous manner possible for his brother, and his brother's family, before he found time to look his own position in the face. Then he bought a keep-sake for Dot, with a few of the very last coins he possessed; and presenting it with an appropriate jest to that sharp-sighted young lady, found his fortitude more sorely tried in the ceremony than might have been expected from the emotions of so inexperienced a personage.

The child, contrary to her wont, for she was a merry little thing, sustaining the bumps and bruises and gravelled rash of everyday life with Spartan fortitude, hid her chubby face on his shoulder, and cried piteously.

"You're going away, Uncle Phil; I know you're going away! Jane told me not to vex you. Don't go away, Uncle Phil. Stay with me and mamma, and Jane, and I'll never vex you any more!"

She was not to be pacified, even by mamma, whose own eyes were red with crying too; and Philip's heart was heavy as he sat down to write his answer, closing with an offer of employment in the City.

Keeping a small trader's books, on a ground floor in Leadenhall Street, is an honest calling enough, and one which affords a view of human nature varied and comprehensive, if not flattering to our kind. This is nearly all that can be said in its favour. To those who have known better days, especially amongst country sports and country scenery, it is a sad come-down. Philip braced himself like a man, though, for the plunge. He felt a certain honest courage and confidence in his own powers of endurance—a certain pride in his defiance of difficulties; not presumptuous, but grounded in reliance on a Power whose omnipotence makes of Fortune and Fate but idle names for a non-existent influence. He had but one weakness left—he was about to indulge it this fine spring morning in his walk to Bridlemere.

He made it early on purpose. Later in the day it would be absurd and uncourteous not to call. A last interview with Miss Brooke in presence of the family was a needless ordeal to undergo; and indeed it would be far better not to see Helen at all. It would still be morning when he reached the house, and he might have a good long look at the closed window-shutters of her room. This could not but be most satisfactory, and, indeed, seemed all he was likely to get. If she should have risen betimes (he had heard her say she often walked before breakfast), and should visit her garden, he could easily stop in the park, far off amongst the old trees, and look on the dear figure for the last time. Why should he selfishly pain her by saying farewell? Would it pain her, though? His heart stopped beating while he thought perhaps it would; and so strangely constituted was this young man, that although he would have given his life for her cheerfully, nothing could have afforded him greater pleasure than to be satisfied she was at this moment exceedingly unhappy. I know, also, but I will not proclaim

why I know, that having solemnly resolved no temptation should induce him to come within sight of her, the first flutter of her dress amongst the evergreens would have brought him panting to her side.

Walking then warily across the park, he did indeed start to see a figure threading in and out amongst the old trees; though why its appearance should have paled his cheek, and made his breath come quick, I am at a loss to explain. Nothing could be less like a young lady on foot, than an old gentleman on horseback; and the figure was none other than Sir Archibald, breaking in a horse he had lately bought for his niece.

Philip watched teacher and pupil with an interest that their own qualities, though both were above the average in their way, would hardly have elicited. While he looked, a contest was taking place, and the pupil, at first sight, seemed to be getting the best of it. There were deer in the park, a waste of keep against which Jack protested in vain. The horse hated deer. There was a near way to the stable through a glade of towering old elms. The horse loved his stable, as these animals so unaccountably do. Uncle Archie, cantering him amongst the herd, could not induce him to pass this turn without making a dash for home. Ladies' horses, in consideration of the wilfulness of their burdens, must have no wills of their own, and the rider persisted in opposing this tendency again and again.

Young horses, especially well-bred ones, are apt to resent anything like prolonged discipline with considerable energy. Two or three sharp rebukes, and have done with it, prove most effectual in controlling these high impatient spirits; but there are occasions when submission on the part of the rider is ruin irremediable to the horse. Then it is indispensable to conquer at any price; and there are two methods of achieving a triumph: by violence, which is dangerous and doubtful; by patience, which is safe and sure. Therefore, if he has time to spare, and the emergency admits of delay, the skilled horseman chooses the latter. Uncle Archie was in no hurry, and he wanted to make the young one quiet enough to carry his niece. He sat like a statue, with a rein in each hand, through all its vagaries, and neither spurred, nor struck, nor jerked the bit, whispering gently and persuasively the while, in the coaxing tone of a nurse remonstrating with a child. The pupil, who had been first terrified by the deer, and then irritated that it might not go straight home, backed, plunged, reared, stood still, and even kicked. The offender

was not confirmed enough in vice to lie down, or rasp its rider's leg against a tree. The teacher preserved alike his temper and his balance, till in less than ten minutes the point was gained, the tempting corner passed at a canter (off-leg leading), and that mutual confidence re-established which makes horsemanship the most delightful of all exercises in a world where everything is more or less a question of compromise.

Even an experienced equestrian is not above being pleased with himself, when he has succeeded in taming a disobedient steed. Uncle Archie looked bright, happy, ten years younger, while he rode on, patting his pupil approvingly with the rein laid on its neck.

"Holloa, Philip!" said he, more cordially than usual, because his friend had tasted of adversity, "you seem as early a fellow as myself. You're come to breakfast, of course!"

"Come to wish you good-bye," answered Philip, returning the kindly grasp. "I go to London, to-day, Sir Archibald, for good and all. I am never likely to see much of Bridlemere again."

Sir Archibald was off his horse, walking alongside the speaker, leading his pupil by the bridle, a situation which inspires the animal with confidence in its teacher, more than all the caracolling of the *manége*. He detected something keener than mere friendly regret in the tone.

"Never say die," he exclaimed, clapping him heartily on the shoulder. "Look at me; had you told me five-and-twenty years ago, I was ever to have a gallop in this old park again, I should have laughed in your beard, if, indeed, when you were cutting your teeth you could have had beard enough to laugh in. Yet here I am, you see, nevertheless, having been kicked about the world like a football, here, there, and everywhere, in the meantime."

"I wonder you ever left it," said Philip, smothering a sigh.

"Thank God I did!" replied the other, with a fervency that startled his companion. "My good fellow, you're a cricketer; did you ever go in for a match without making up your mind to win? You're a bowler, and, they tell me, a pretty straight one; did you ever deliver a ball at the wickets without intending, at least, to cut the middle stump clean out of the turf by the bowling crease? If you mean business, do it thoroughly; if you don't mean business, let it alone. The bravest man I ever met in Mexico, or anywhere else, I saw drowned, because he would turn his horse back in a

river when he had swam more than half-way across. Pluck will do a good deal, sir, and coolness more; but commend me to a fine dogged British obstinacy, that sets its teeth and goes in to win, at any price, right or wrong."

"There are some men who play a losing game all their lives," answered Philip. "I don't know why it should be a consolation to have done your best, and strained your muscle, and broke your heart, only to be beat after all."

"There are some games at which it is better to lose than to win," returned the other. "Take an old man's word for it, my boy, the prize is never worth half as much as the training to obtain it. Self-denial and self-sacrifice are the two qualities that distinguish what I call a man from a mere figure to hang coats and breeches on. I speak plainly to you, Philip, because I think you're made of stuff that will stand a strain on it, and there's no use denying that the strain may be very hard to bear. You will have to begin life now, instead of ten years ago. Your case is something like my own. Shall I tell you what prevented my hawser from parting every strand, and saved me from drifting helplessly to the devil?"

Philip was interested in spite of his sorrows, and touched, moreover, by the kindness of his companion's manner. In addition to this, they were proceeding towards the house, and the longer the conversation lasted, the more likelihood of arriving there before it was over, so he replied, with deference—

"Anything in your history that you like to mention, Sir Archibald, cannot fail to be of service to me. Few men have led so adventurous a life, or come through it so successfully as yourself."

Sir Archibald smiled: the quiet saddened smile of one who is looking far back into the past.

"My life has been a stirring one," said he, "because I was such a coward I dared not brave my first affliction. Because I had not the courage to stand face to face with my own heart. When a man mistrusts his resolution, it is good generalship to retire. At first I could only get relief by the stimulus of constant difficulty, requiring constant exertion. I felt that I could only fight my great sorrow by flying from it, and I fled. The path I was bound to take lay very plain before me, but I could only follow it through a rough and tangled thicket that tore and pierced me to the quick. I got a good many thorns and scratches, but still I struggled on, and forced my way. I do not care to publish my history,

such as it is, to the world at large. I believe I have scarce ever alluded to it so distinctly before. But you are young and bold, Philip Stoney; honest, I know! and sometimes, I suspect, a little rash. You have had difficulties, adversities, even sorrows, and met them like a man; still, though the brunt of the fighting is over, by far the most difficult part of the campaign is yet to come. There will be a sad and painful reaction when you find yourself tied down to the drudgery that, in one way or another, we all have to get through at some period of our lives. Then you will, perhaps, begin to fret and complain. You will say yours is a hard lot, a heavy burden; that there is no sorrow equal to your sorrow; and Providence itself has dealt with you more harshly than with your fellows. I spin my yarn only to show you that others have had their share of buffeting as well as yourself. I left England, as I then believed, for ever, some thirty years ago; not, as one good-natured friend supposed, because I had gambled away a younger son's inheritance at Crockford's and Newmarket; nor, as another charitably affirmed, that I had quarrelled with my elder brother, who refused to pay my debts. On the contrary, I had everything to make life pleasant. Society I liked; a profession that suited me; youth, health, and plenty of companions as young and healthy as myself. I—I was attached to a woman, Philip, such as a man meets once in his lifetime. It's no use talking about these things now, but I—I would have done anything in the world for her. Well, I threw the whole freight overboard, and I saved my own honour and her happiness."

"It must have been hard to give her up," said Philip simply, thinking of his own burst bubble the while.

"It seemed impossible!" answered the other, "and therefore could only be done with a rush. I shut my eyes, and leapt, and the thing was over. I never so much as received a line from her again. Do you think she will not thank me when we meet the other side of the blind ditch, so deep, so narrow, and so easily crossed? Do you suppose I thought I should never see her any more when I put a thousand miles or two of blue water between my wild passions and the sweet innocent face? What is the use of believing in anything, my good fellow, if you don't act upon your belief? As surely as I darkened my short span of life here by leaving her, so surely will she take me by the hand, and thank me that I saved both her happiness and my own, hereafter. I would have done it for her sake, even had I thought we were never to meet again. Now the sacrifice seems as nothing compared

to the return. What saved us both from ruin was this—the certainty of a future. She has been dead, Philip—dead for years. The trees that were planted when the grass first grew above her grave are now twenty feet high. There is but one life that parts us, and it is not worth ten years' purchase. I can look at the whole thing calmly, hopefully—nay, cheerfully, to-day, but it was hard, I grant you, very hard at the time, and had I not cut the link that bound me to her at one stroke, I never could have undone it while I lived. Your case might have been worse, Philip, after all. You have lost your past, and your present is none of the fairest; but even in this world you have got your future still."

"Men have risen in London from very small beginnings," said Philip, brightening in spite of himself, through his companion's influence. "And to London I am going, to start in life afresh, on fifty shillings a week. By the time I have saved a fortune out of that, Sir Archibald," he added bitterly, "I shall be pretty well on into the future you speak of with such encouragement."

"Put your trust in Heaven, my boy, and keep your powder dry," answered Uncle Archie. "If the chance arises, be ready to take advantage of it. If it never comes at all, remember it is not your hand that steers the ship. Keep your weapons sharp, and above all, your shield as bright as a diamond. With head and heart, and a clear conscience, none of the prizes of life are out of a brave man's reach. Here we are at the windows, and my brother down already. I'm glad of it, for I'm nearly famished. Ring that bell, there's a good fellow, for somebody to take the horse, and we'll go in and ask Helen to give us some breakfast."

A family party was, indeed, assembled in the cheerful morning-room, consisting of the squire, not in the best of humours; Jack severely shod and gaitered, with a shooting-dress of defiant materials, much frayed and weather-worn. Tatters curled up on the hearth-rug, solemnly noting everything with one sleepless eye, and Helen herself in her usual place, looking very pale and handsome behind the tea-urn.

It was a formidable moment for Philip, and he followed Sir Archibald through the French window, with hot cheeks, cold hands, and a beating heart.

No aneuroid barometer is so sensitive of change as the temper of a man in love. The price of Consols does not fluctuate so variably as his spirits rise and fall with the apprehension of hostilities or the prospect of peace. Helen

put her hand out so cordially, and the sweet eyes were raised with such a kind, sympathising look to his face, that Philip felt a whole ton of care lifted off his heart in an instant, and voting ruin, or even absence, bought dirt cheap at the price of such looks as these, sat down to breakfast in a state of unreasonable happiness that completely took away his appetite.

This phase lasted half-way through his first cup of tea, to which Miss Brooke helped him, as she did to every other article of nourishment, with her own hands. Then the squire, whose breakfast was a tedious and untidy performance at best, and whose fork seemed to have forgotten the shortest way to his mouth, rapped impatiently on the table, and called out—

"Helen! Helen! When you've done with Mr. Stoney, I wish you'd give me some tea. What's the matter with you this morning, child? I'm sure you needn't treat Philip with so much ceremony. You're no stranger here, Philip; but I wish you'd come oftener. When's the brewery to be finished. Hey?"

The squire did not remember things very clearly now. The fire at the brewery had served him for several days with a subject of which he made the most, enlarging on it to his listeners in every conceivable aspect, and originating the most improbable surmises as to its cause, progress, and eventual effects. Now, he had forgotten all about it, though he treated Philip with a more marked friendliness than usual, as though he had some dim, hazy consciousness that Stoney Brothers were ruined.

The guest would have answered, but he felt his face was scarlet, and pretended not to hear. Helen, too, seemed very busy with the urn, and although the heater of that domestic article was usually denounced as useless in sustaining a necessary temperature, I think, on this particular morning, no complaints were made of its deficiency in caloric.

After the squire's observation, Miss Brooke never looked at Philip once. Neither did she speak to him, nor, indeed, to anyone at the table. My own conviction is that she dared not trust her voice, lest she should cry, and what position could be so false as that of a tea-maker in tears?

Jack, with his usual felicity, commented on the cloud that seemed suddenly to have overshadowed them. He had himself, as yet, added nothing in the way of conversation to the common store, though he made exceedingly good practice with eggs, ham, hot rolls, butter, mutton chops, cold pie, and

the usual materials of a country-house breakfast. Now he pushed his plate away, and remarked—

"We are rather dull this morning, don't you think so, Philip? We want Walter back to keep us all alive."

Jack believed steadfastly in Walter for every purpose, grave or gay, though a less partial companion must have observed that the hussar seldom thought it worth while to put forth his powers of amusement for his own family.

Philip ventured to reply that "He was not himself in particularly high spirits. He had come to wish them good-bye, which was always painful, even at breakfast time. He must go to London just as the spring weather was beginning, and Bridlemere looked beautiful. And he was sure he should never see a place like it anywhere else."

Then he stole a look at the tea-maker, and admired, as he had done a hundred times before, the length of her eye-lashes, for she gazed steadfastly into her plate, having discovered something no doubt very novel and curious in the pattern, blue and gold, with the Brooke crest in the centre.

"Dull!" said the squire. "We're all dull now. I don't know what has come over the house. Jack there was always a stupid fellow from a boy. I never hear Helen's voice except when she's reading to me; and my brother Archie gets his letters at breakfast time. Where's Walter? why isn't he down yet? Gone to St. Barbs is he? I wish he'd stay here, now I'm better. But he's right. Jack, I say Walter's quite right to go into society. What was I saying? Yes, Waywarden's altered, very much altered. He's quite a young man too; he's younger than I am, though you wouldn't think it. Let me see, Archie, wasn't it the year I married that Waywarden shot the woodcock in my poor wife's flower-garden? Helen, I wish you'd leave Stoney alone, and put more sugar in my tea. She's very absent sometimes, Archie, just like her poor mother. Don't you think she's growing very like her mother about the eyes?"

Helen cast a pleading look at her uncle, as often happened when the squire's infirmities took this unhappy turn for personality. She caught his eyes fixed on her with a depth of loving tenderness that was very touching in that old, war-worn face, but he interposed, as usual, with a light laugh, to spare her visible embarrassment.

"Helen is in a horrible funk, as Jack calls it, for she thinks I shall ask her to ride Clarion this afternoon, and she must have seen him mutiny from her bedroom window, half an hour ago. Didn't you, Helen?"

"Yes, I did," said Helen, "and I watched you a good ten minutes before you conquered him."

Then she remembered what had kept her so long at the window, and that the horseman's was not the only figure in the park. How she wished she had held her tongue. How she wished she had the faculty of reserving her blushes till she was alone. It would be a relief, thought Helen, when this interminable breakfast was done. And yet, though the ordeal was painful, she would have endured it cheerfully till luncheon time, because, when a move took place, one of the party must go for good and all.

Jack was the first to get up. No sooner did he push his chair clear of the table, than Tatters started instantaneously from a state of profound repose to one of exuberant and inconvenient energy. Jack, according to custom, was bound for the farm, and his round of trial and self-restraint was about to commence.

"Don't forget the new plough," exclaimed the squire, who had issued contradictory orders concerning this instrument every day for a month; "and mind you tell Jones not to give a warranty with the colt. If Marks won't take him without, he can let it alone. And mind, Jack, they're to do nothing at the ten acres yet. I won't have a spade put in, nor a tile carted, till I can see it done myself. Drained? Of course it must be drained. But I shall be about the place again by the middle or end of next week, and that's time enough, in all conscience. Let old Stubbs begin thinning Shotsdale, and I'll see him to-morrow to arrange the top and lop, only they mustn't touch a stick below the Middle Ride. And, what was I saying? Oh! the colt's not to be sold at all till I've seen him. And the draining? Yes, I'd almost forgotten about the draining. You've no head, Jack; you never remind me of anything. They must get to work with the draining at once. Begin with the ten acres, you know; and if Stubbs bothers about Shotsdale, tell him I won't have it thinned at all. It's the best covert in the country. Waywarden killed two-and-forty pheasants in the corner by the pond. Let me see, was it the year before or the year after he shot the woodcock in your mother's garden? And never mind the plough, Jack, I haven't made up my mind about it yet. And—and—that's all I can think of just now, but let me see you again before you go out, in case I should remember anything else."

So Jack's task, you observe, was no very easy one; and though Tatters was doubtless a great comfort, it was a heavy burden he had to bear, and a heavy heart to help him. Every-

thing about the place was mismanaged, and going to the bad. Nor, while his father lived, did Jack see any prospect of amendment. It was provoking; it was discouraging. Moreover, he could not but feel that he was fit for something better than this everyday drudgery, without even the satisfaction of doing his drudgery effectually in his own way. He neither received the wages of a servant, nor possessed the authority of a master; and while he saw his future estate gradually but surely crumbling away under a system of extravagance and mismanagement, he was himself leading a life of almost penurious privation and self-denial.

But Jack, like his uncle, had a strong sense of right. A firm reliance on duty as a cure for discontent. In some of the Brookes this feeling was altogether wanting. In some it amounted almost to a religion. Jack was a square man in a round hole. He knew it, felt it, was very uncomfortable, but being there, made the best of it, and shaped off his edges as well as he could.

Tatters only thought his master walked a turn faster than usual, while he took his accustomed path across the park, in the direction of the farm.

Neither was Uncle Archie without his own annoyances. The squire was perfectly justified in complaining that his brother read his letters at breakfast. One of these missives made him pull a long face before he had finished his first cup of tea. Helen, who possessed, of course, the feminine faculty of seeing distinctly through her eyelids, knew by a certain way he had of smoothing his moustaches that he was at a loss. If she could have trusted her voice, the voice that never failed to brighten him into smiles, she would have spoken.

Perhaps, had she known the cause of his vexation, she too would have shared in it very keenly, honestly angry as women are under disappointment when caused by ingratitude; they boil up and quiver all over, flashing out sparks of generous impatience from their eyes, when the other animal only smiles cynically, as though he expected nothing better from the nature of his kind.

Uncle Archie had written to a friend, a real friend, whom he had once taken out of prison with the last hundred he would see before pay-day, and another time dragged from the Danube, more dead than alive, under the unpleasant sputtering of a Russian howitzer, who on both occasions had vowed eternal gratitude, and whose bare word would have now been enough to obtain for Philip Stoney an office under Government. The real friend had written to refuse point-blank.

Altogether, the little party had sufficient cause to be dull, and the gloom only deepened as the time to separate approached.

Uncle Archie, what with the perusal of his letters, and the discussion of a very elaborate and substantial meal, prolonged his sitting to the utmost permissible limits, but even he rose at last. The squire's old valet came in to remove crumbs and other fragments from his master's dress, to pass a damp napkin across his face, and run a comb through his scanty, silvery hairs. Then he proceeded to wheel the invalid, feebly waving farewells to Philip with an inane smile, into the library, where he would take up his usual position till dinner-time.

Sir Archibald collected his letters, and walked out at the French window, lighting a cigar. Helen, with a strong inclination to take flight, and a stronger still to remain where she was and have a good cry, locked up the tea-caddy with the greatest care and assiduity. Philip Stoney, feeling his hands like ice, his heart like fire, and his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, found himself, on the eve of quitting her for ever, alone with the woman he loved.

What a situation for a scene! What a chance for a declaration, an avowal, and—the usual consequences! Here were the properties, the accessories, the actors themselves, dressed in character, and knowing their parts by heart. A wainscoted room, a silver breakfast-service, a high chimney-piece, an old-fashioned screen, and a portrait of the first Brooke of Bridlemere, looking down on the whole. Through the open windows a blue sky, a bright sunshine, brown ferns waving in the breeze, long vistas of grand old elms, with the deer wandering ghostly and indistinct between, rooks wheeling across the sky, and far away, through a break in the avenue, the yellow strawyard and red-tiled roof of a farm.

Near the table, with its glitter of plate and its snowy cloth, a beautiful young woman, grave, and pale, not half so placid as she looked. Leaning against the chimneypiece, a man who had always thought her an angel, and never dared to tell her so.

It was, indeed, a great opportunity, and what came of it?

Philip got his lips unglued so far as to enunciate the talismanic name—"Miss Brooke."

He said it in a voice so unlike his own that she raised her startled eyes. Then he stopped; and Helen unlocked the tea-caddy she had just locked up.

"Miss Brooke!" he tried again, more distinctly; and I

think in another sentence it would all have been over, but that the squire was at this moment heard calling, "Helen, Helen!" in testy and impatient accents, from the library.

The girl looked up almost wildly.

"I must go," she said. "My father wants me: I hear him calling. Mr. Stoney, God bless you! and good-bye."

Her hands were both in his. Ere he could bend his head down to them, they had slipped from his grasp, and she was gone!

Then Philip Stoney realised, for the first time, the whole extent of the misfortune that had befallen him.

He would wait to see nobody else now. After a parting with Helen, and *such* a parting, other farewells would be a desecration. He took his hat; he stepped through the window; he looked neither to right nor left, but walked away quietly, steadily, slowly, yet resolutely, in the direction of Middlesworth, of London, of the end of the world! never to see her again—never, never again!

His heart had thrilled with one moment of intense, unspeakable joy, but it was over directly. He was scarcely across the window-sill ere the reaction came on.

"She did not call me 'Philip,'" he thought. "She said, 'God bless you, *Mr.* Stoney.' What could I expect? I am the loser in the game all through, and I am glad of it, for her sake. It is better so. What matter how much I suffer, as long as she is contented and happy? Had she cared for me as I do for her—no, that's impossible; but had she cared for me at all, she would have been miserable now. Thank Heaven that she does not—I say, thank Heaven that she does *not*! Let me look along my future calmly, without prejudice, like a man! It is only in moments like these a fellow requires to call upon his pluck! I shall love her all my life; there's no harm in that. I shall love her as if she were an angel in heaven. Sometimes she'll think of me, and remember this morning, and like to feel that if she had chosen, one man, at least, in the world belonged to her, to do what she pleased with—to take or leave—to mar or make. She will be a great lady some day; the noblest name in England might be proud to win her. She will be a happy wife. Yes, I pray she may be a happy wife. I wonder if I shall ever see her; perhaps with children, beautiful like their mother, dark-eyed, and with her own sweet smile — the darling! Let her only be happy, and I don't care what becomes of me!"

I think Mr. Philip Stoney, thus communing with himself,

all unconscious of the fine spring morning, loved Miss Brooke better than Lancelot loved Guenevere. I think there is a chivalry of self-sacrifice nobler than the chivalry of daring. I think a man's own happiness is the most precious offering he can lay at a woman's feet.

He walked very slowly and thoughtfully across the park. You see he had not much before him in the future; and, were they not painful, what credit would there be in these efforts of our better nature? It was all Bridlemere till he reached the high-road, and Bridlemere was a magical name to him, though he was but a young brewer; as magical a name as if he had been the first Caradoc himself, with Arthur's *accolade* on his shoulder, riding in mail and plate through an enchanted forest to seek his peerless bride.

There are giants in these days as there were in those before the Flood; and we should know it could we but measure them about the heart. Brave men have lived before and after Agamemnon, and the Victoria Cross is earned, if it be not won, several times in a week. But of all efforts, that which most elicits the qualities of courage and patience, that which realises the highest type of heroism, is the entire offering up of self, without a boast and without a murmur, to the happiness of another.

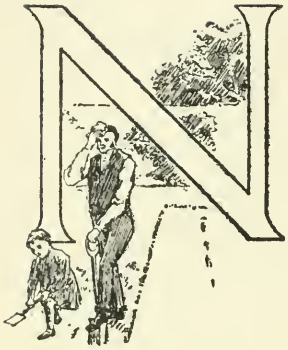
Philip looked back towards the house once or twice as he went along. It was natural he should. He pictured to himself the squire's easy-chair in the library; the white head resting on the back, the cushions piled to prop the failing limbs; the daughter's graceful form bent over a book, as she read to her father in that gentle, quiet voice, so sweet and yet a little sad, which was not the least of Helen's charms. When he reached the rising ground, beyond which Bridlemere was no longer visible, he turned again for one more look, and could have believed he really saw the scene his imagination painted for him so vividly.

Such clairvoyance is not always to be trusted. The real scene is this: An empty bedroom on the second floor, the blinds drawn, the fire-irons rolled in the hearth-rug, the apartment "put away." No chance of intrusion from the housemaids, and a pale, beautiful face, with the dark hair pushed back, peering from behind the blind, watching, watching, eyes fixed, lips apart, not a quiver in the delicate features, but a load of care on the clear and gentle brow. Presently the eyes light up. Somebody has stood still upon the rising ground amongst the trees, and turned round towards the house. A pair of white hands clasp each other hard as he disappears

behind the hill. Then a shudder creeps over the lovely, sorrowing face. Helen Brooke turns from the window, to fall on her knees by the disused bed, and, burying her head amongst the doubled-up blankets, gives a little helpless moan, and cries, poor girl! as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XVII

PARTNERS



OBODY on earth enjoys the country like a real Londoner. There is many a man who farms his five hundred acres without getting half the exercise, enjoyment, and excitement out of his fertile loam and broad, smiling pastures, afforded from a rood or two of garden, if it be only within ten minutes' distance of London Bridge by rail. Probably, as desire springs from separation, so is zest the child of contrast. To sit in a dingy back room all day, decently attired, intent on the one great object of money-making, must wonderfully enhance the luxury of a careless, unbraced lounge, with a rake and a straw hat, amongst the evening perfumes of your own garden in summer. To know that you mustn't stay more than ten minutes, and that this mouthful of fresh air is to last you all day, till the 6.30 train brings you back again, cannot but impart to each precious gasp an exquisite flavour, of which the habitual rustic shall never know the charm. Christopher North says, if he had to write a poem on Loch-na-Gar, he would descend to the depths of a metropolitan coal-cellar, and, doubtless, visions, never equalled by reality, are conjured up every day in dark, dusty offices, in crowded warehouses, in noisy city thoroughfares on which the sun cannot shine, behind ink-stained desks, over weary ledgers, in the midst of the traffic, and turmoil, and distraction of hot, hurrying, busy, panting London. Visions of grass-grown meadows, rippled by the fresh country breeze, of hedges white with May, or black in the luxuriance of their tangled prime. Here the broad river flashing back the sunlight from a sheet of gold; there the deep woods hushed and motionless, sleeping in the light summer haze.

Fancy, stimulated by longing, paints the panorama with her softest brush dipped in her brightest colours, and the dreamer's eye, bounded by a horizon of ten feet at most, wanders over half a kingdom, to feast upon the riches, and the variety, and the glories thereof.

Mr. Pounder, grave, deliberate, sedate of manner, and precise in attire, was a different person altogether from a hale, hearty, broad-shouldered man, in a flannel shirt and straw hat, with open neck, and sleeves turned up, showing, by the way, a *physique* that would have done no discredit to a bargeman, digging for his life, before breakfast, in his garden at Balham, whose name was Pounder too. The Strand Pounder was smooth, plausible, exacting, suspicious, and utterly without compassion. The Balham Pounder was a cheery, open-hearted fellow, free of speech, given to hospitality, careless, generous, and confiding, a little *sat upon* by his wife, and much too indulgent to his children. Yet the man was no hypocrite in either capacity. He was simply one of the many actors on our stage whom circumstances compel to "double a part." In each character he was equally in earnest. To see him digging now you would say there was no such enthusiastic gardener in the world.

A sturdy boy, absurdly like the man in squareness of form and doggedness of feature, follows his father's movements with intense interest. Showing thus early the tendencies of Cain, he is armed with a spud taller than himself, for the destruction of slugs, and he uses this weapon with unsparing energy. There is blood on his dirty little hands; he will very likely object to these tokens of his success being washed off before breakfast. In the meantime, he feels only inferior to his ideal, the large, strong, good-natured father, who has dug all that piece of ground since sunrise.

Every now and then Pounder straightens his back and looks round his "little place," as he calls it, with immeasurable satisfaction. In Horace's garden he had space to find a lizard; Pounder's is just large enough to contain a thrush, and is haunted by one of those birds with the clearest pipe in Christendom. Woe to its hopes of reproduction though, should Pounder junior find the nest, as find it he surely will. "Those little hands were never made" to spare anything so suggestive of destruction, and nobody will be surprised, though mamma will be very angry, if the thrush flies farther off into Surrey against another year.

The colonists of Balham measured their land by feet

rather than acres. Mr. Pounder's garden is a hundred and twenty feet one way, taking in the close-cut privet hedge, and in this space every style of landscape gardening has been attempted with varying success. While he looks round it now in the intervals of his labour, he speculates whether he will not do something more in the manner of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. Move those flower-beds farther back; cut down that laurel; plant rhododendrons in the vacant space; put a basin and fountain, railed in for security against children; and scatter grotesque monsters and statues about the whole. He must think it over, he says to himself, getting to work again, fully persuaded that he can carry out the new idea with success.

A little girl in a sun-bonnet, on whom Pounder junior looks with some contempt, as being only a sister, comes trotting out of the house, and puts her face up to father to be kissed. She is a demure little lady enough, and has been sent by mamma as a forewarning of breakfast.

Mrs. Pounder herself now appears at the door, with another yet smaller child holding by her forefinger. Mrs. P. is a "genteel person," at least she would probably so describe herself, and is proud of possessing great administrative powers. She is thin, pale, freckled, slim-waisted, and prolific, having nothing remarkable about her but prominent teeth and long earrings. She rules the household, including Pounder, with a temperate but absolute sway; keeps its expenditure down to the most prudent financial estimate; goes to church very often, to parties very seldom; is especially fond of her garden, though, small as it is, she scarcely walks to the end of it once a month; and bears successive branches with the unremitting regularity of the olive.

"Father!" she calls in a shrill voice, shading her eyes from the morning light with her hand. "Breakfast!" and disappears again to make tea, with a quiet rapid step that sufficiently denotes the decision of her character.

Now this is the part of the day Pounder enjoys most. Fresh from the pure air and hard exercise of the garden, it is delightful to put on decent clothes and sit down to a good breakfast in the society of wife and children.

The tiger has its cubs; the vulture its brood; the money-lender, no less than these animals of prey, must provide for the necessities of home and young. When he fastens his talons on the devoted buck, to drain his blood, it is not his own fierce thirst he has to slake. The little ones must be fed. Though the victim is bleeding gold at every gasp, the

operator is, perhaps, but fulfilling one of the best and noblest instincts of our nature.

Pounder was hospitality itself. Nevertheless, he *did* look a little disappointed to hear a man's step on the gravel—to see a man's figure coming up the path. Whoever it might be he would have welcomed him more cordially to dinner than to breakfast, and he knew well enough at the first glimpse who it *was*. There were few people he would not rather have seen at the "little place" than his swell partner, fashionable in dress, overbearing in manner, and crushing in influence, from the large share he had in the business.

"Come to breakfast, Mr. Multiple, I hope?" he managed to say, however, with a good grace enough. "My dear, a place for Mr. Multiple"; and Mrs. Pounder, who piqued herself on her breeding, had presence of mind to check the apologies that rose to her tongue for yesterday's tablecloth, the assistance of the children, and her own second-best gown of the year before last.

Multiple was not above doing great man amongst those who were dependent on him. He enjoyed the deference with which he was treated, the surprise of his hostess, I fear—even the confusion created by his unexpected arrival. He was dressed, as usual, with much splendour, looking handsome and vulgar enough. Mrs. Pounder, who thought herself a good judge of such things, considered him a pattern of what she called "a fashionable West-Ender." She only wished, though, there had been time to turn that tablecloth, and she could have put her hand on two more eggs in the house.

"That's a fine boy!" said Multiple, nodding at the eldest-born, who was watching the visitor with unaffected displeasure. "Like his father as two peas. And been gardening, too. I know you're an early man, Pounder, so I won't apologise for coming to breakfast. Plenty to eat, thank you, Mrs. Pounder. Sure never to find *you* unprovided. I've got some business to talk over with your husband, after breakfast, as usual."

The prospect was unwelcome. Pounder did not like to have business brought down to Balham, when the firm paid such a heavy house-rent for their workshop near the Strand. It spoilt his meal altogether, and, indeed, the guest was the only one of the party who showed a good appetite, for the children were intimidated by the stranger, and Mrs. Pounder, "a very poor eater," as she said, "at the best of times," was now much too flurried to swallow anything but a morsel of dry toast and half a cup of tea.

The master of the house felt a little sulky, nor was his

mood improved to learn that his partner had thus intruded to save himself the trouble of going on to their joint place of business in the afternoon. Multiple had been staying near Croydon with some smart friend, where he met Lord This and Lady That—firing off these great names for the edification of his entertainers in his usual swaggering style. Pounder could scarce suppress a movement of impatience at the mention of all this unbusiness-like gaiety, but he did suppress it, notwithstanding. Every man, they say, in one way or another, has a hook in his nose, and Pounder was anything but a free agent where his partner Frank Multiple was concerned.

Mrs. Pounder soon made her escape with her brood. The visitor put his dirty boots on a chair, lit a cigar without asking leave, and proceeded to business at once.

"Get a pen and ink," he said, somewhat authoritatively, "and take down my directions, if you are likely to forget them. You can go up by a later train."

Pounder, much dissatisfied, was forced to comply. His guest puffed out a great cloud of smoke at the tea-urn, and went on—

"Captain March's paper is no use to us any longer. Mexico has refused point-blank to put his name to another bill. I had it last night from Mounteagle, who sat next me at dinner. By the way, I doubt if Mount will be able to swim much longer. Have you got March's name down?"

Pounder nodded, and put his pen behind his ear, while he looked over a notebook. He was the Strand Pounder now; Balham no longer.

"Haman will take the last on the usual terms," said he. "It's as good as the others. I'm sorry my lord's found him out. He was a fair customer to us, was the captain!"

"He's done at last," observed Multiple. "Don't you forget it. Sixty per cent., and half goods, wouldn't tempt me now. There's a little thing to be done for Bolster and Co. on commission. I'll give you a note, and you can set about it this afternoon. Did you sell those South Africans yesterday?"

"Waited one more day, sir," answered the other. "The market won't turn on us, I think, just yet."

"Don't overboil it, that's all," said his partner. "The House won't have it, I know, and they'll go down by the run directly Parliament meets. By the way, old Gobie's dead, and the post-obits have fallen in. It's a tolerable haul. I thought he was good for ten years at least, and so did his son.

That reminds me: what did we do Lord Mounteagle's last at?"

Pounder turned over the leaves of his notebook, and answered—

"Thirty; all cash."

"Thirty—all cash," mused his partner. "Well, I hardly know. I don't much like to refuse him, but there's a deal of bad paper about."

"It's best to be cautious," answered the other, "though his lordship, I believe, *will* be very rich."

"One brings another, it's true," continued Multiple. "Still, it often happens that those who have most friends have least money, and it's not business to advance, even at a hundred per cent., if you are never likely to be paid at all."

This was incontestable. Pounder admitted it. After a pause, he observed, with some hesitation—

"I hope you've made a good bargain about the young horse, sir. I tried to dispose of him for you to an old customer, but he would have nothing to say to it. These ventures seldom pay well, sir, in our trade. Somehow they don't seem to fit into the business."

Now, this young horse was rather a sore subject between the partners, and had occasioned more than one remonstrance on the part of the elder. Pounder stuck to the old-fashioned principle of risking but one speculation at a time, investing the profits as so much capital to the good, after deducting a percentage towards a fund against occasional loss. With great caution, close attention, and a strict adherence to his favourite rule of never standing "a heavy shot," whatever might be the temptation, he thought this the safe and sure way of making a fortune.

Multiple, on the contrary, went on a different system altogether. He argued, that to be engaged in a great variety of speculations involved familiarity with the private affairs of an extensive acquaintance. In one circle he could get information that afforded valuable aid to his transactions in another; and a money-lender, he opined, should be the best authority on all matters of the Turf, the Exchange, the Share Market, nay, even on home politics, foreign affairs, and the last blunder committed in Downing Street. He was the reverse of his colleague in ideas and principles, as in dress and appearance; but, at Balham or in the Strand, his will was law. He had a hook, you see, in his partner's nose, and though made of mere paper, it was stronger than iron, because it represented gold.

"I shall keep the horse, and win 'The July' with him," said he abruptly—not that he meant to do so, nor fancied that the animal had the slightest chance, but out of pure contradiction. "Your friend must be a devilish bad judge to refuse such a horse as that!"

"You know best about his judgment," answered the other, piqued at his companion's tone, and aggravated, moreover, by the maid, who kept putting her head in to know when she might take away the breakfast things. "He's more in your set than mine. All I can say is, that if young Brooke don't know a racehorse when he sees him, he has lost a good deal of time in his apprenticeship, and paid a handsome premium besides for nothing!"

Multiple's eye brightened, and his pink cheek grew a tinge pinker at the name.

"We have had his paper before," said he, laughing, "and I don't know that some of it was worth the stamp. But I hope you accommodated him, nevertheless. I know something of the family."

"This bill was as good as a Bank-of-Englander," answered Pounder. "It was indorsed by Mr. de Rolle, who is, I believe, in the same regiment."

Multiple laughed again. He had thought it must come to this, though he hardly expected his advice would have been so quickly followed.

"That's a new name, isn't it?" he asked carelessly. "I don't remember seeing it in the market. My memory is pretty good in such matters, and so is my information."

"I've seen it on another bill," answered his partner triumphantly, "and to accommodate the same party. The two seemed to have been done about the same time. I suppose, if the gentleman is such a friend of Mr. Brooke, he won't last long."

Multiple ruminated. So rapid a one-two rather puzzled him. He resolved to get to the bottom of it. The best point in this man's character was that he never left his nut without cracking it.

"Where did you light on these bills?" he inquired. "They wouldn't need to travel much, with Rags, as we call him, on the step."

"Mr. Brooke negotiated one of them himself. That was when I tried to make him take the horse. The other came to us with a good many more from Haman. They are dated within three days of each other. Except for that, they are precisely identical. The young gentlemen

have been in mischief, I fancy; but that is no affair of ours."

"What is the amount of the first bill?"

"Three hundred."

"And the second?"

"Three hundred."

"That's a good lump of money in so short a time. Are they to be got at?"

"They're both in the office at this moment. I can dispose of them without the slightest difficulty when I reach town to-day."

"Keep them! my good friend, keep them!" exclaimed Multiple, with a quiver of repressed excitement in his voice. "Whatever you do, don't part with them at any price. You see—you see—they may be of the utmost value to us."

"I confess I do *not* see how they can be worth more than cash," answered the old man, with some surprise, "though I daresay they will be paid in full when they come due."

Multiple was recovering himself. The nut seemed hard, but he was determined to crack it without assistance. He must give his partner a reason, though, for hiding it up, monkey-like, in his cheek, till he had leisure for the operation.

"Why, you see," he remarked confidentially, "six hundred is a good deal of money. Three he might have managed to pay up if he won a stake anywhere in the spring; but I know my man, and I don't think he could hand over six hundred if he had it in his pocket. Then, of course, he will want to compromise. Very likely offer us a post-obit. His father can't live a twelvemonth at most. Those two bills might bring us in three times their value if we keep our hand on them."

"You know best," answered Pounder sulkily, in a growl that seemed to contradict the assertion, and muttering something about "business" and "vagaries," under his breath.

"Then, you'll attend to my directions," resumed the other in a matter-of-course tone. "Dear me! it's past eleven o'clock. I shall not be at our place at all to-day. If anything very queer turns up, write. Make my compliments to Mrs. Pounder. It's time for me to be off. Good-bye, Pounder. Don't forget to keep your hand shut on those bills."

Uttering these disjointed sentences, particularly the last, with an air of the utmost carelessness and good-humour, but in a tone which his listener knew by experience meant real

earnest, Mr. Multiple took himself off, to the intense relief of his partner, his partner's wife, and his partner's children.

The more he thought over the matter, the more he felt convinced there was a mystery of which something might be made. If there was a secret, that secret he was resolved to possess.

Unfortunately, however, this is the most fragile of all prey. To grasp a secret is too often like grasping a soap-bubble—the very act destroys and renders it valueless. Multiple, however, was no clumsy operator. Above all, though he could make haste on occasion, he took care never to be in a hurry. He was human, too, although a gambler, speculator, betting-man, and money-lender; had his likes and dislikes; could take a languid interest in others so far as they acted on his own passions or feelings, and considered himself altogether a man of amiable disposition, but too sensitive to do himself thorough justice in the affairs of life.

Now, Helen Brooke's dark eyes and high-bred air, not devoid of a certain haughty shyness that became her well, had made a deep impression on Mr. Francis Multiple, none the less that his admiration seemed to produce a very opposite feeling in the young lady's breast. There are some men whom a woman's dislike piques into a strong desire for her capture; others, again, who are only to be ensnared by an obvious predisposition in their favour, and who take a deal of bringing on; in fact, who require much of the love-making, at least in the earlier stages, to be done for them. These last are often the gentler and nobler natures, almost always the most constant; and although it may be up-hill work with them just at first, they warm to it very readily, and move fast enough when fairly set going. Women, of course, understand both kinds thoroughly, and each may rest assured that he will receive just so much encouragement as shall prevent his abandoning the chase in despair, and no more.

Now, Frank Multiple had been smitten with Miss Brooke's charms the very day he set eyes on her near Dame Batters's cottage in the neighbourhood of Middlesworth. The sensation, without being novel, was keen and pleasing. It increased at the ball, and he paid the lady as much attention in his own unembarrassed way as circumstances would permit. The girl did not fancy him in the least; but, like all sensitive people, she was very shy of wounding another by word or manner, and many compliments and civilities passed unnoticed which would have earned for him—from Lady

Julia, for instance—a very effectual set-down. There is a class of men in society, sufficiently numerous, and on pretty good terms with self, to whom the adage, "silence gives consent," seems an infallible maxim. Many a retiring damsel has suffered torture by "the question," under the oppressive gallantries of these familiars, especially when the right man in the wrong place, being at the other end of the room, is thus prevented from a nearer approach, and, with the exquisite discernment and sense of justice peculiar to his sex, chafes the champs in jealousy and bitterness of spirit, unreasonably angry with her for what she cannot help. Then the forward gentleman gets the credit of being on the best of terms with the backward lady, and even persuades himself that his suit goes on prosperously. Nobody pities him much, however, when he is undeceived, as he is sure to be in the end, for the "real jam," or what old-fashioned people call true love, triumphs at last in common life as well as on the stage; and where it exists, a word, a look, an allusion to the most indifferent subject, will bring people together as if they had never been estranged, and could never have a difference again.

In the meantime, Frank Multiple admired Helen Brooke sufficiently to covet her for his own, and therefore made up his mind that she should become his property without delay. She was amiable, carefully brought up, ornamental, and well-bred. The connection would be much in his favour: it would be another step gained on the social ascent; and this time there would be no dirt to wade through, only a pale, proud, spotless lily to crush beneath his heel.

He left the train at Vauxhall Station, revolving many matters in his mind, amongst which the mystery of the two bills kept continually coming uppermost. Reflecting on the indorser's frank disposition and inexperience in such matters, he resolved to try what he could learn from De Rolle himself. It was possible the hussar might be in town. He would, at anyrate, look for him at his club. Passing Mr. Plausible's Commission Stables, a happy thought struck him. He would ask Rags to give him his valuable opinion on a stepper. If this arrangement should entail luncheon, he knew he could extract the hussar's whole private history in less than two hours.

The hansom went bumping and bounding along alarmingly near the wheels of all other vehicles, and making no compromise whatever about grazing the kerb-stones, till it stopped at that great nursery of heroes which dominates so

nobly over the rest of St. James's Square. Unheard-of fluke! Rags was in the club; and, stranger still, seeing that it was his especial duty to inform himself on such matters, the porter knew and admitted the fact. Hungry Rags had just ordered luncheon. Hospitable Rags was delighted to have a guest: the repast should be doubled forthwith, and laid in the other coffee-room. Nothing but great presence of mind in Multiple served to put a veto on champagne.

"Help you to see the quad? Of course I will," said the host heartily, and delighted with the job. "The very thing. Was just thinking what I should do this afternoon. Here comes luncheon! Have a cutlet? Drain the Bass first? Quite right: it's the real antibilious!"

The visitor was most welcome. Rags, like many of his comrades, was always rushing up to town in a tremendous bustle, and had nothing to do when he got there. To one who has not his London at his finger-ends, a real thorough-going town man is an invaluable companion. Also, the hero worship that never outlives a little experience of the world, bids ingenuous youth give its senior credit for much Satanic wisdom, and many vicious qualities of which it is beautifully innocent. Rags believed Multiple to be a second Corinthian Tom, with D'Orsay's manners, the worldly knowledge of all the Chesterfields in one, the brain of Talleyrand, the tongue of Faust, and the heart of Mephistopheles.

When men drink sherry after pale ale, at two o'clock in the day, and begin to talk about horses, they are apt to become confidential, discursive, and, indeed, a little indiscreet. Multiple drew his entertainer out with considerable skill. Another pint of sherry made Rags unusually loquacious.

"I've done most things now," said this honest fellow, wishing to impress on his friend that he was "at all in the ring." "Racing, hunting, sporting, soldiering; but what I like to go in for most, is society. Society, you understand me, old fellow—none of your second-raters, but the real thing. Front rank—first-class, I mean—best blood, thoroughbred, you know, without a stain."

"Exactly!" answered the other gravely.—"Duchesses, countesses, and so forth."

Rags, though bemused with sherry, blushed, well-pleased.

"That's right," said he. "You're a man of the world, Multiple—you've seen it all. Don't you agree with me? Nothing pays so well as what I call the first flight."

"To a fellow with your advantages, I daresay it does," replied his guest. "Though it's hopeless work for a green

one. I fancy you cut your wisdom-teeth before you were weaned; but for my own part, I cannot help thinking I began too young. Why, I knew Paris as well as I do Pall Mall, at sixteen."

"No!" exclaimed Rags, stricken with admiration at this beautiful instance of precocity. "Ah! There's nothing like it, to teach a fellow what life really is!"

Multiple knew what this so-called life really was, better than most people, and he might have told his friend, but he didn't. He had experienced its feverish pleasures, its false excitement, its discontent, its lassitude, its self-reproach. He felt too surely that the good was all gone out of him now; and though he regretted it, he had not even the desire for amendment. It is sad when vice, under the misnomer of pleasure, has become a daily necessity—when the mind has been so sapped and weakened by indulgence, that disease is its normal state. And this contemptible condition is what young men admire. Why is it that experience, even in wickedness, should possess such a charm for the untried spirit? Is it owing to the folly of youth, or to the carelessness of middle age? Does the man wish the boy to wade through the mire like himself? or is it from sheer laziness, neglect, and fear of ridicule that he ignores or makes light of the stains on his own attire? The young ones are surely less to blame than those from whom they take their cue.

"So you've been at all in the ring, De Rolle?" said Multiple, after a pause, during which Rags had swallowed another bumper of sherry. "Getting tired of it, I suppose. *Blasé, ennuyé.* Used up at five-and-twenty, eh?"

"Not quite that," replied the other, delighted, however, with the imputation; "but I feel game for a fresh excitement; something different from all I've tried before, you know."

"Have you ever won a good stake on the turf with your own horse?" asked Multiple. "Seen Mr. de Rolle's colours flying past the chair on the outsider they laid twenty to one against before the race? That's not a bad moment, eh?"

"It's only a money excitement, after all," said Rags. "I'd rather win the Grand Military myself, if I could ride the weight, which I can't."

"I see," laughed the other; "you like something in which there is a more personal interest. Well, did you ever fight a duel, run away with another man's wife, or back a bill for a friend?"

"I've done the last," said Rags, idiot enough, I believe, at the moment to wish he could say he had committed the other

two follies also. "I've done the bill," he repeated, "and, odd enough, do you know, it once happened to me to back the same bill twice over."

Multiple turned round to ask the waiter for a toothpick. "Indeed," said he carelessly; "how was that?"

"Why, it was for a brother officer, you know. Good fellow —great friend of mine,—man we all know. I name no names." Rags looked very wise. "Soldiers aren't always the best men of business. We made a mull of the stamp, and had to do it again. Good joke, wasn't it?—all for want of practice."

"I don't think I quite follow you," said Multiple. "I beg your pardon, I was looking at that woman in the street. You observed something about a stamp."

"Only that I backed a second bill for my friend when I found the first was no use. That was the way we came to do a bill, as I told you, twice over."

"You destroyed the first bill, of course, so it did not much matter. I daresay the thing happens every day."

"Oh yes! I destroyed it. At least, my friend did. He wrote to me at once to say he had put it in the fire. You know the man, though I won't tell you his name. He's a very honourable fellow. You can't think how annoyed he was. It made him so angry that he never thought of returning the bill to me till it was too late. He tore it up at once, and burned it. Shows how disgusted he was, for he's generally the coolest hand in the regiment."

"That's capital sherry, and I've had an excellent luncheon," said Multiple, provokingly uninterested, to all appearance, in his friend's anecdote. "Now for the stepper. I think you'll say he's very clever. Good gracious!" he interrupted himself, looking at his watch; "I shan't be able to go to-day, after all. Who'd have thought it was half-past three o'clock! Some other time, my dear fellow, I'll ask you to give me the benefit of your eye to make and shape. I must be off now, positively. Many thanks to you, De Rolle, and good-bye."

Mr. Multiple had got what he came for, besides the luncheon. He did not think it necessary to inflict himself with the companionship of honest Rags during the afternoon. That gentleman's conversation, though guileless, was neither instructive nor amusing. The hussar was a little disappointed, but at such a club as his there was no lack of comrades, jovial, cheerful, happy fellows, to whom headache, heartache, and indigestion were unknown. Was not Brown, the celebrated pig-sticker, having his weed after tiffin in the smoking-

room? Were not Jones of the Plungers, and Robinson of the Engineers, and three or four lancers, and half a dozen of the hussar brigade ready to amuse and be amused in the hall? Rags had no difficulty in passing the day till dinner-time.

Multiple proceeded straight to the office near the Strand. "Three hundred," he muttered, as he walked along. "Three hundred, and not worth three hundred pence. Yet I wouldn't take a thousand for it. No, nor ten of them; for this is the card that, if I play it right, will win me the stake I go for. Hurrah! for handsome haughty Helen, with the proud head and the large dark eyes!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LONG LANE

JACK BROOKE went farming, without thinking it necessary to ask the squire for any more contradictory directions. He crossed the park, and reached the accustomed stile, thence to strike a certain green lane, down which it was his habit to plod daily. A long lane indeed, and metaphorically as well as in reality — one that seemed to have no turning. It was something like Jack's own life. The way was easy to travel, confined between rural hedges, pretty and pleasant enough. The views from it, though not extensive, were smiling and peaceful. There was summer shade and winter shelter above his head, and a moderately good road in either season beneath his feet. But no doubt there was a little too much sameness in the journey. Ups and downs, hill and dale, moor and moss make easier, or at least more cheerful, work than a dead level; and the smoothest path that ever was trod becomes wearisome, if a man follow it day by day. Jack fretted a little sometimes at the monotony of the groove into which he had been forced; but he would have been ashamed to confess a sentiment he held so unmanly as discontent, therefore he fought against it, and trampled it down, as only a good fellow can.

From his mother, the eldest Brooke inherited a rare quality of inert resistance, which had descended to neither brother nor sister. Perhaps he alone had been old enough to imbibe from her certain principles of resignation that she had found the great consolation and happiness of her life. Like many another, she had paid dearly for her one mistake; her one sin against her own heart, so fully avenged as soon as committed on that heart itself. Instead of fighting with her fate, and bewailing the sorrows that originated in her own deed, she grasped eagerly at the only hand able to help her, and so lived peaceful and contented, to die hopeful and happy, before Helen was old enough to call plainly on "mamma." Jack not only resembled his mother in disposi-

tion, but looked back to her as his ideal of that perfection which he was never to see again on earth.

Of course, under these circumstances he was destined to marry somebody as different as possible from his pattern.

Tatters trotted watchfully along before his master, darting off at intervals in pursuit of rabbits, with an energy none the less dashing that he had never in his life caught one above ground, and never would. He liked his expedition all the better that Jack had now left off riding a certain excellent cob, whose rapid paces used to reduce the poor little terrier, panting behind with its tongue out, to the last stage of exhaustion. But Jack had sold the cob in Middlesworth market, thereafter to come into the possession of Lord Waywarden, as imported direct from Wales, and nobody knew what had become of the money—five-and-forty pounds in Middlesworth notes, that he had taken for the sale. There was a mystery about these notes, for they did not find their way to Walter, nor did Helen wear a new dress out of any part of them, and Jack was most unlikely to keep a secret hoard of his own.

Also, about this time, and soon after his brewery was burnt, George Stoney received the same sum exactly, from an anonymous correspondent, to clear off a long-standing debt, of which he had no precise recollection.

So Jack, for want of a horse, strode sturdily along on a pair of well-turned legs, that carried their owner with considerable vigour and freedom; but, alas! Black Care not disdaining pedestrian exercise, had dismounted from the cob too, and walked beside him, offensively familiar still, whispering in his ear of a thousand difficulties he wanted to ignore, and reminding him of a thousand vexations he was trying to forget.

She had bothered him so much and so often about the farm, that he was waxing callous on that point; and Walter's affairs, generally a fruitful subject for anxiety, seemed, notwithstanding Fugleman's death, to have taken a new and more prosperous turn, so she probed him with Helen, and made him wince and smart again, while he reflected on his sister's altered looks and lowered spirits of late. "Why is the girl so pale?" whispered the hag, with her accustomed ingenuity. "So patient and apathetic now, content to spend whole days about her father's easy-chair, and forgetful of all her former amusements and occupations? Can it be that she thinks the squire is getting worse, or is it that her own health is failing from constant attendance on an invalid?

There's something amiss with your sister, Jack—the girl you're so fond of, so proud of, that you think the fairest specimen of her sex in Europe, always excepting the French print in your bedroom. Suppose she, too, should be unhappy; suppose she, too, should have some secret sorrow, and be walking erect with the outward endurance of a Brooke, though

> The burden laid upon her
> Is more than she can bear.

Goaded by his tormentor, Jack turned out of the lane, and crossed a tufted old pasture, sadly in need of draining, at the rate of six miles an hour. All his own troubles rushed in upon him at once, and he wondered what a woman could have to bother her. Then he thought of Walter's equal spirits under difficulties; of his brother's recklessness; of the temptations to which he was exposed; and so thinking, he reached the end of the pasture, and looking over the fence, began to count some sheep folded in the next field.

He laughed, as he reflected what a poor job Walter would make of the daily business he took upon himself so contentedly; but the laugh was neither honest nor cheerful, for he was thinking of a parable in which flocks and herds did not suffice a covetous magnate, who robbed his poor neighbour of the little ewe-lamb that "lay in his bosom, and was to him as a daughter."

Jack looked up from his occupation to the wooded distance, behind which stood Tollesdale, and thought if he were Walter, he would not care to be the darling of so many, whilst a certain high-born damsel, graceful of gesture, and saucy of speech, with diamond eyes and chestnut hair, was willing to ride with him, waltz with him, flirt with him, perhaps —here the black hag put the probe in smartly—perhaps ;to love him. It was not strange that he should lose count of the sheep, and have to tell them by scores over again.

Suddenly, the poor frightened woolly creatures began to leap and bounce, and rush against each other in a state of great confusion; for Tatters had gone off like a mad thing, yelping with delight, as he always did when he heard the measured footfall of a horse, swinging along at a gallop.

It was the one temptation the dog never could resist, though in consideration of its dangerous tendency to equestrians, punishment and reproof had alike been tried to break him of the practice. Jack started in pursuit, and recrossing the tufted pasture, saw, as a man sees with the corner of his eye, who is running at speed, a groom endeavouring to force his

horse over a fence someone had evidently leaped before him. The more successful rider was already in the long lane Jack had recently quitted. Tatters, bouncing through the hedge immediately in front of a galloping horse, might be the cause of an untoward and dangerous accident. Jack, well aware by experience that hallooing was no use, kept his breath for a run over the pasture, and very gallantly he sped across the rough uneven surface. Very gallantly, too, he gathered himself to leap the fence into the lane, and came lightly over it like a hunter, stakes, and growers, and bank, and ditch, and all!

Then he stopped as if he was shot, and stood stock still, a living statue, blushing—blushing to the roots of his brown hair. Lady Julia Treadwell had pulled her horse up within three strides of him. How could he see in his confusion that her colour was nearly as deep as his own? How could he tell that she had watched him from the corner by the sheep-fold; that she was saying to herself at this very moment: "Well, he can't dance, but, my gracious! can't he just jump! yes; even in an old shooting jacket and leather gaiters there's something very noble, after all, in what I call a man!"

These smart, fashionable, ball-going London young ladies do not, I presume, divest themselves of their womanhood when they put on their crinolines. Strength and courage still constitute their ideal of the male, and I doubt if intellect can hold its own with inches, while neither of them have the slightest chance in a match against pluck. Lady Julia knew a fine specimen when she saw one, as well as her neighbours, and she saw one now. Jack would have been there still, if she had not spoken first. He felt quite giddy when she rode up and placed that pretty hand in his. She had recovered her own composure by this time, and was in higher spirits than ever.

"No wonder you looked surprised, Mr. Brooke!" she laughed out merrily. "You wouldn't guess in a month how I got here. I have brought Cockamaroo straight as a line from Shotsdale, and made him do the boundary fence by the osier-bed in his stride. He smudged it awfully, but we got over without a fall! They must learn, you know; mustn't they, Mr. Brooke? I don't think my groom will come out of that field to-night. Look—that's the fifth time he's ridden at the rails; and my horse made nothing of them. I shall be disappointed if he don't grow into the best hunter we have. I am sure when he heard your dog, he thought it was the hounds. Did you see me, Mr. Brooke; and didn't you wonder who it was?"

All this was to give Jack time to recover himself, but she took away his breath notwithstanding, sitting there so easily on her horse, in such a well-made habit, with such trim gloves, such a sweet little hat, such a dainty bit of collar under the pretty chin; above all, with the caressing accent and the bewitching smile, that a vainer or a less inexperienced man would have interpreted more truly! He felt conscious that he looked like a fool. He stammered; he smiled inanely; he gasped; he could find nothing better than to pat her horse's neck with his strong ungloved hand. He would have liked her to order him to lie down before the animal, that she might trample his life out beneath its hoofs; but such an execution would not have suited Lady Julia at all; and this was one of the rare cases in which a gentleman's confusion lost him nothing in the good graces of a lady.

It is possible that she prolonged it on purpose, for the diamond eyes shone down with kindly softened beams, and, though generally so intolerant of anything like awkwardness or want of confidence, this condescending damsel bent over the shy, handsome, ill-dressed young squire with an air of tender interest that she never showed to the men of mark by whom she was habitually surrounded. Perhaps there was something in the novelty of the situation that amused her; perhaps the love of sovereignty inherent in her sex was flattered by his obvious vassalage; perhaps her woman's heart thrilled to acknowledge the presence of the one being destined to become hereafter its treasure and its lord.

Jack stammered out a greeting of some sort at last. He never knew exactly what he said; but had he been sure it was the most arrant nonsense ever spoken, he would not have had it back at any price, for it raised the saucy smile he thought so bewitching, and called forth the silvery laugh he had so often distinguished amongst a hundred other voices at the Middlesworth ball.

Lady Julia was in no humour to be critical, far less sarcastic; and I doubt if it is possible for a man to hold a more favourable position than when he meets unexpectedly a lady who is kind enough to take an interest in him, the said lady having galloped herself into a high state of good spirits and good humour, on a young and not very tractable horse. She is conscious of looking her best, with eyes sparkling and complexion heightened by the exercise; she is pleased with herself; pleased with her horse; pleased with her admirer; above all, she has got her courage up, her energies into full swing, and feels that nothing can stop her

now in whatever she wishes to accomplish. Women are easily discouraged by reverses, but the other sex might well take a lesson from the dash and spirit with which they play a winning game. Lady Julia, so to speak, held four by honours in her own hand.

When a lady wishes to make the agreeable to a married man, she invariably commences conversation by asking after his wife, getting the ceremony over as soon as possible and dismissing the subject at once; with a bachelor, again, if he have one, she invariably displays extraordinary interest in his sister. This topic is fertile in personal allusions, and has none of the admonitory associations connected with the other. Lady Julia was determined to know all about Helen —her walks, her hours, her needle-work, her garden, the school children she lectured, and the books she read.

"I am so fond of your sister, Mr. Brooke, and I see so little of her. Mamma calls her my swan. She is as graceful as a swan, isn't she? I wish I was exactly like her. Why don't she ride? We might meet half-way; wouldn't it be nice? I often ride to the cross-roads at the end of the lane. I'm not above two miles then from Bridlemere."

"And I've walked to this field day after day for weeks, and never knew there was only the hill between us"; honest Jack blurted out, turning scarlet at his temerity immediately afterwards; and adding, clumsily enough, "I suppose you generally ride over with Lord Waywarden or some of them from Tollesdale?"

"Not I," answered Lady Julia, with her ringing laugh. "Don't you know, Mr. Brooke, that I'm fast, and independent, and audacious, and all that sort of thing, because, as Nethersole says, I hang on my own hook. I'm sure you've heard people abuse me. I believe you agreed with them. But what's a poor unprotected female to do? Mamma never comes down till two o'clock, and papa, I feel, loves his farm better than his daughter. All farmers do. Don't you love your farm, Mr. Brooke, better than anything else in the world?"

Jack's heart answered loudly, "I know what I do love, and how much I love it!" but the words would come no further than the roof of his mouth, where they seemed to stick.

I can conceive, though, that his reticence did him no harm. If speech be woman's privilege, surely silence is man's prerogative. The former is often abused; the latter rarely.

"Will you ask your sister to come and see me, Mr. Brooke?" (Jack, like his brother, thought the name sounded very soft and pretty as she spoke it.) "Mamma is so fond

of her, and papa thinks she is a good example for wicked me. It is no use inviting you to come over, I know. I believe you disapprove of our doings at Tollesdale. I believe you're a hermit, Mr. Brooke, and hate everybody!"

He was quite sure he didn't hate her, as she smoothed and stroked her horse's neck where his hand had lain. He muttered something about being "very happy," and "his father's health keeping both his sister and himself a good deal at home."

"Then I must gallop over to see Helen," said Lady Julia gaily. "I am determined we shall be better neighbours for the future. It's a charming ride—all grass; and except that one by the osier-bed, the fences are nothing for a hunter, if you like to come straight. Look at my groom, Mr. Brooke; did you ever see such a muff? He's got off to pull the rails down. Well, if I were a man, I think I'd rather break my collar-bone than be beat like that!"

The servant had indeed dismounted, being a sensible fellow, when he found his efforts at coercion of no avail from the saddle. He was now engaged in the difficult task of holding a riotous young horse by the bridle with one hand, whilst he loosened a stout piece of ash timber with the other. So long as the animal was amenable, the rails refused to give; when the latter yielded a little, the former backed, and tried to break away. A few leisurely bullocks had already arrived to contemplate the proceedings, which promised, indeed, to be a work of time. Lady Julia laughed heartily. She did not care how long she sat on her horse in that pleasant lane, with Jack's honest embarrassed face at the level of her knee.

She had to find conversation for both, and no one was better qualified. Jack was too happy for talking. The warm flood of light that turns everything to gold, was dazzling his eyes, penetrating his heart, pervading his senses, and intoxicating his brain. That first moment of submission to the spell is the best, I fancy, in the whole series of sensations called up by love's white magic. It must come from heaven, for the evil one surely never could be permitted so powerful a charm. There is an Eastern superstition, which teaches that when Paradise was destroyed, one rose-tree alone remained, invisible, yet retaining its celestial fragrance; that every human being is permitted, once in a lifetime, to taste its perfume. None can thus have an excuse for disbelief in a heaven of which the senses have assured them, if but for an instant; yet those are happiest to whom Azraël proffers the rose, and even while they smell it, fetches them away.

It is worth the whole reaction to know that, however weak, however fallen, man can eat angel's food.

Lady Julia, however, could not sit motionless, gazing down in silence on her companion. It was all very well for him to stand there open-mouthed, drinking, draining the elixir every drop; but in the inner as in the outer sense, though a man may bare his breast, and we need not turn our eyes away, a woman must drape herself with *les convenances*, which constitute, indeed, the staylaces of her moral being. So the skirt of the habit sustained a kick and a twirl to set it right, while the wearer thought of another safe topic for conversation.

"And your brother, Mr. Brooke—your pleasant good-for-nothing brother—what has become of him? We miss him dreadfully at Tollesdale. We haven't seen him since I don't know when. Not since he killed his horse at Oakover. I was so sorry for that poor horse. Do you know, Mr. Brooke, I cried when I saw him lying in the field with his back broke."

Jack winced, his chin fell. The rose had been snatched from his face, and, indeed, the thorns tore him to the quick, it had been dashed so smartly away. Profoundly ignorant as he was of the seas into which he had ventured, of course, he mistook the lights, beacons and other signals, intended for his guidance, and drifted, at the mercy of the winds and waves, aimlessly about in the dark. She read him as easily as her prayer-book, almost without looking at him, and she saw the blank disappointment come creeping over his face, chill and dismal, like the mist down the side of a mountain. She saw, too, the brave victory over self; the frank, chivalrous attachment that could worship without return, without even hope; the noble affection that could value her as a sister, though it might not cherish her as a wife; and seeing all this plainly, Lady Julia turned her face away from the honest, pleading, mournful eyes, and entreated with more kindness of manner than ever, that she might be permitted a closer inspection of that "love of a creature, Tatters!"

The dog was seized without difficulty. Indeed he had been walking round the leather gaiters, rather wistfully, jealous, as these sagacious animals are, of the person who engrossed his master so completely. They hate strangers themselves, and are justly impatient of that delight in new faces which seems peculiar to the human race. Tatters growled audibly, showing the whites of his eyes, and an exceedingly sharp serviceable set of teeth, when he was lifted to Lady Julia's lap. He seemed to resent the indignity, and by no means to appreciate the advantage of his position.

"Well, he *is* a love!" exclaimed her ladyship, taking his muzzle deftly in her kid gloves, and opening it with a twist that nothing but long practice could have attained. "I declare, if the roof of his mouth is not quite black! Ah, Mr. Brooke, you're a happy man to possess such a dog as that. If it wasn't a sin to part a couple so fond of each other, I'd beg him of you on the spot, and ride home with him in my lap all the way to Tollesdale!"

"Would you like to have him?" asked Jack eagerly. "I should be so happy to give him to you. I'll send the keeper over with him the first thing to-morrow morning. He's a good little dog, Lady Julia, and will turn away from nothing; besides, he's so well broke, and so attached."

"Now that's a man all over," said her ladyship reprovingly. "You don't consider the poor thing's feelings one bit. How should you like it yourself? Is that the way you value true affection? Mr. Brooke, I'm ashamed of you!"

Jack coloured again, and felt embarrassed, for he did not quite know what to make of this playful tone; enjoying it exceedingly, yet entertaining sad misgivings that it must be set down to the familiarity of a sister-in-law. He looked from the dog to the lady, and thought how like, and yet how superior was the latter, to the print that always met his waking eyes in the bedroom.

It may have crossed his mind that life would be too much happiness if he could substitute the reality for the likeness.

Tatters, however, as is often the case with a third party in such meetings, found himself in a thoroughly uncomfortable and even false position. A lady's lap, if a delightful situation, has the drawback of being somewhat insecure. To a dog clinging by the folds of a slippery habit, on the incline plane created by her attitude in the saddle, it can possess no charms whatever. Tatters, gazing wistfully at his master, looked as if he felt ridiculous, and whined to be released. Lady Julia laughed, and took pity on him.

"You've hurt his feelings, Mr. Brooke, poor little dog; and he'll be miserable now till you make it up with him. There, take him gently and set him down! So you were obliged to come round by the gate after all! Well, now the horse has completely conquered. Perhaps you had better walk him about a little till he is cool."

The latter part of this speech was addressed to the groom, who had ridden up somewhat crestfallen at his defeat, yet consoled by anticipation of good cheer when he returned to Tollesdale, where he would entertain the audience of the

servants' hall with a full account of his young lady's vagaries, equestrian and social; detailing what she did say, what she might have said, what she did not say, and drawing largely on his powers of fiction for the greater embellishment of his narrative.

How anyone paying poll-tax for servants can hope to enjoy the privacy dear to our national prejudices, is to me a perpetual marvel. Are they not at all seasons in the best possible position to watch his actions? and can they find any topic of conversation so engrossing as his vices, follies, meannesses, failings, and general imbecility?

The groom knew his young lady despised him for his want of horsemanship; but he knew, too, that the footmen, under-butler, and all the maids would listen delighted to his account of what befell during her ride; so he touched his hat in silence, and began to walk his horse up and down, just within earshot of the two young people, much to the indignation of Tatters, who wanted to fly at him more than once.

"Then you'll tell Helen," said Lady Julia, without specifying the message more clearly, and leaving her hand in Jack's rather longer than is customary in wishing good-bye amongst mere acquaintances, probably to render her leave-taking the more impressive. "I shall have a charming ride back, and I will not lark over any more fences if you think I had better not." (Jack, in order to show that he valued it, had entreated her to take care of her neck.) "Good-bye, Tatters! I mustn't take you away from your master, because you love him so, you dear little dog! Good-bye, Mr. Brooke; stick to your farming. I shall tell papa that you are even fonder of grubbing about in the dirt than he is. What a nice lane for a gallop—and one ought really to have a gallop like this every day!"

So she settled herself in the saddle, gave her little white veil with its black spots a tug that brought it tighter than ever across her face, and cantered easily away on Cockamaroo, leaving Jack to gaze after her open-mouthed and spellbound; half afraid, though it was broad daylight, that he might awake at any moment and find he had only been enchanted in a dream.

She looked back once (for her groom, of course) before the leafless hedges hid her from his sight, and then Jack gave one great, deep, long-drawn sigh—a sigh that expressed rapture, relief, anxiety, devotion, a leavening of disappointment, and a full measure of strong, tender, unselfish, and unreasoning love.

He was in the hot fit just at present, and the cold had yet to come.

We ought not to lift a lady's veil and criticise the flush on her face as we do the unconcealed embarrassment of a man. Lady Julia rode on thoroughly and unreservedly happy. She had no fear of rivalry, no misgivings of inferiority—all that might come hereafter: now she had only room for this one conviction to fill her whole being, that Jack Brooke loved her. Jack Brooke, the only man she ever saw who made her heart beat faster and her colour rise. She was a quick, clever girl, practical enough in general, and intolerant of romance, knowing the world perhaps better than is good for one of her years. She had seen a deal of false coin passed, and had taken no little at its real value, but she acknowledged the ring of the pure metal when it was thrown down at her feet. She could not be mistaken now, she who had studied theoretically, both in books and in society, the symbols of our common weakness. He was shy with ladies, no doubt—awkward even at times, and, she could not deny, generally ill-dressed; but it was something deeper, she knew, than shyness that shone to-day in those tender kindly eyes, and a man might be embarrassed to the verge of imbecility without betraying that wavering, wistful discomposure which, like the tremble of the compass needle, indicates with certainty a magnetic influence sustained. As for his dress! What did it matter how you dressed the Apollo or the gladiator? What could all the tailors in London have done for his exterior when he leapt that high, wide fence so lightly into the lane? It was beautiful! beautiful! And he loved her! She blushed beneath her veil from sheer pleasure at the thought; and then with the true unvitiated love came its invariable attendant, humility.

"I'm not good enough for him," said the girl, to her own tumultuous heart. "Not half good enough. I pray Heaven to make me better."

She laughed at herself, too, more than once; the transformation could not but amuse her. It seemed so odd that she, the sarcastic, worldly, impenetrable Lady Julia Treadwell, whom half the men in London admired, and were afraid of —whom the women of all ages called cold, and flippant, and heartless, bent solely on social distinction, and preferring a marquis to everyone in the room, except a duke, should have fallen in love like a milkmaid, without calculating the cost. What would Miss Prince say? How surprised she would be! And mamma? how provoked! Everybody would make a dead set at her, she knew, and that would only cause her to

love him, if possible, ten times more than ever. Ah! it would never come to anything, of course; but nothing should prevent her treasuring the idea, hiding it up, and feeding on it secretly in her own heart. Already the first gush of delight was tempered with anxieties, uncertainty, misgivings. In these pleasant draughts, you see, the bitter flavour lies very near the brim. It seems a law of their existence that you are not to slake your thirst unchecked. The first touch of the cup against your lip is indeed rapture, but soon the bitter rises to mingle with the sweet, and renders perhaps every drop of the scorching beverage more precious still.

Lady Julia's groom was very hungry before he reached the servants' hall at Tollesdale. Luncheon had been over for an hour and more ere she rode up the western avenue, at a walk, with her head drooping and her rein lying loosely on her knee.

When she alighted from Cockamaroo she patted and caressed him more than usual, even touching his sleek, swelling neck with her lips; then she went to her own room, and sat idle in an arm-chair, without taking off her habit, till it was nearly dark, forgetting even to drink her habitual cup of five-o'clock tea; and that such abstinence cannot but be injurious to the female system I am inclined to admit, because, notwithstanding her long fast, she had little or no appetite for dinner.

Her ladyship, though she rode back so slow, must have been half-way home before Jack Brooke moved from the spot where they parted. He continued to gaze after her as if she had been a comet or some such celestial body, leaving a long luminous track of glory in its wake. Then he called Tatters to his feet, and, much to the astonishment of that wise little dog, who was unused to weak demonstrations, took him up and kissed him. Why a man of Jack's temperament should do anything so absurd I am at a loss to conjecture; neither can I be supposed to know why Captain Raven dances quadrilles with sister Anne, when Blanche has one of her bad colds and mamma won't let her go to the ball; nor why young Rapid, who is flippant, not to say impertinent, with his seniors at our club, and will never listen to *me* for five minutes together, though my budget of news anticipates the evening paper,—and when I tell a story I go scrupulously into details,—why, I say, this hasty young gentleman sits contentedly for hours in old Proser's dining-room, listening patiently to his host's platitudes. Old P. is an unmitigated bore. His claret is as light as his conversation is heavy.

Miss Proser, I grant, is an angel with its hair dressed; but then Miss Proser is upstairs playing melancholy tunes on the pianoforte in the gloom of the back drawing-room, wishing her papa at the —— well—at the club, we will say, or anywhere else, provided her swain were out of his jaws. Will they never ring that dining-room bell? Miss Proser frets even more than the guest, though he will come up after all, I hope, before candles are brought.

In the same way I cannot tell you why everybody who can get invited goes to Lady Vandal's archery parties at Gooseberry Green. Is it the taste for shooting, do you suppose, or an honest love of Lady Vandal that brings gentlemen and ladies to her villa in such shoals? She never invites me to these parties, so how can I tell? But I hear that the butts, or targets, are scarcely twenty yards apart, and that not half a dozen people ever fit an arrow to the string. Why should they? The weapons they affect are for closer quarters and conflict hand-to-hand. But Lady Vandal asking, as she does, nothing but nice people (whence, perhaps, my exclusion), is careful to ask those who think each other nice. Gooseberry Green, therefore, though contracted, dusty, overlooked, and an inconvenient distance from London, represents Paradise to several imaginative couples; and *dear* Lady Vandal is so indissolubly connected with each in the other's mind that both are almost in love with the hospitable dowager herself.

If you could see her, as I have done, in a morning dress, possessing, and indeed requiring, no crinoline, picking caterpillars off her currant bushes, you would still more fully appreciate that power of association which sheds the charm of the queen of flowers over something that "is not the rose, but has been near the rose!"

Tatters liked his master's caresses better than Lady Julia's. He frisked, and sneezed, and rubbed his nose against the turf, and scoured about in small unmeaning circles with the utmost delight. "Love me, love my dog," is an old proverb scarce complimentary to the true, devoted, incorruptible friend who goes about on four feet instead of two, but full of meaning notwithstanding. You kick the beast for its own sake, you caress it for its proprietor's; and some day, perhaps, you learn that the canine was the nobler nature, the stauncher, bolder, more unselfish heart. There is many a dog as deserving of an epitaph as Byron's. Many a man, I fear, who might write over the grave of his faithful partial follower the sad suggestive line—

I never had but one, and here he lies.

CHAPTER XIX

PRESSURE

GOADED by his own thoughts, loathing his own society, and dreading of late to be left alone, Walter Brooke had become exceedingly restless, and even irritable, since the mishap that lost him his favourite horse. When off duty at the barracks, which was frequently the case at an out-quarter like Middlesworth, he generally galloped up to Bridlemere. The society of Rags had become distasteful, although that gentleman was slow to find it out, and indeed much gratified with the greater deference now paid him by his friend, attributing it to his own increased importance, and more intimate knowledge of the world. With Multiple, however, Walter had struck up an intimate acquaintance. Something in this man's easy conventional tone, indolently ignoring everything that was unpleasant or laborious, half sneering at, half pitying those whose ideas soared above the low level of self-indulgence he was pleased to call philosophy, seemed to soothe Walter's habitual irritation, and divert him from his own thoughts.

Multiple could be an agreeable person enough when it was worth his while; and he grudged no pains now to obtain a permanent footing in his young friend's family, because he was playing a game of which the prize was extremely precious—until won.

The money-lender, though his business as such, owing to the activity of his partner, was known but to few, had many calls upon his time, and frequent occasions for paying flying visits to the capital, whence he returned brimful of all the latest news and gossip. After one of these expeditions, he usually contrived to land first at Bridlemere, where he unpacked his budget and brought out his wares in their full fresh bloom, as yet untarnished by the curiosity of Middlesworth. The squire was always delighted to receive him. For the poor invalid clinging helplessly to that world which was slipping out of his grasp, a guest was no mean prize, who arrived, as it were, with

the aroma of St. James's Street clinging about his person; who could relate the very words used by the notabilities of the day last night at Boodle's, or this afternoon at White's; who spoke familiarly of great names, known only to his listener in the columns of a morning paper; and who could furnish the most authentic version of every public event, because he always happened to know somebody who was the best authority on the subject.

The end of the hunting season had arrived. Hedges were budding, grass was coming up fast; primroses and anemones carpeted the woodlands; daisies were getting their heads above the surface in the open. Two or three positively last days from the duke had produced two or three disappointments, and one good gallop in the evening; but the Vixens had got through their trouble; the lambs were growing into sheep; the ground was too hard for pleasure, and it was high time to shut up. Racing men rejoiced in their opening season, and were already busied with the great Middlesworth Handicap. Benedict, well in, had come up to five to one.

All these considerations did Walter turn over in his own mind, while he rode his first charger, the only sound horse he had left, from the barracks to Bridlemere.

His position was now becoming day by day more precarious; and having but a straw to cling to, he grasped it like a three-inch hawser.

He had made up his mind that Benedict *must* win, simply because such an event could alone save him from ruin. He had "got on," as it is called in the jargon of the ring; that is to say, he had backed the horse long ago, at something like twenty to one. Prudence whispered, now was the time to "lay off" a good deal of the money, and ensure a certain profit; but Walter was too deep in the mire to be extricated by any such cautious measure. No; a small stake could do him no good; a large one would save his commission. It had come to that. If the horse lost, he must sell out in order to face the settling, and then the remnant left would not suffice to meet even one of the bills Rags had endorsed. If that fraud was discovered, his character was irretrievably blasted, and he was a ruined and dishonoured man.

Pleasant reflections for a sweet spring morning! He cursed his generous, well-broken horse for swerving from a donkey at the roadside. He hated everything. He hated himself most of all. In such a frame of mind, it was a relief to overtake Multiple walking across the park in the direction of Bridlemere. The well-bitted charger accommodated itself at once to the

pedestrian's pace, and the two friends, for such they had become of late, proceeded together towards the house.

"Cabinet Council to-day," said Multiple, full, as usual, of the latest news; "and an organised attack on the Government when Parliament meets next week. They were laying even money on a dissolution at the clubs last night. The Queen came up from Osborne, and goes back by the three o'clock train. Glaisher has smashed his balloon. There's a monkey with no thumbs at the Zoological. Consols are at ninety-two for the Account, and Benedict's broke down!"

Walter turned pale, and, with all his self-command, the moisture broke out on his forehead.

"Will he go for the race?" said he, in a quiet, measured voice, a little harsher in tone than usual. It was hard to guess by his demeanour that the news affected him so deeply; but his listener was accustomed to deal with these well-bred undemonstrative people, and he did guess it, if indeed he was not already sure of it from his own knowledge.

"They have not knocked him out of the betting," he answered cheerfully. "He's only gone down a point or two. The stable can't afford to scratch him, I know, and go he will, if he comes to the post on three legs. I haven't laid off a shilling of my own money, I can tell you that. He must win at the weights, if they can keep him fit, and I believe he has only hit his leg after all!"

Walter felt a little relieved, but he did not like it. He could scarcely conceal his vexation and anxiety. The other looked in his face for a moment, and then laid his hand on the charger's neck.

"Excuse me, Brooke," said he, with some feeling; "I trust you will allow me to consider you a friend, and to take a friend's interest in your affairs. You've backed this horse heavily, I know. Never mind how I know it. It's my business to learn almost everything that is going on. Mind, I *think* he'll win; but I needn't tell you it's a great field of horses, and there are two or three very well in, that we know but little about. If the thing don't come off, my dear fellow, I suppose it's no secret you will get a horrible facer?"

"I shall lose a hatful of money," answered the other doggedly. "More than I like, if you mean that?"

"Of course, nobody likes to lose money," observed Multiple; "and when a man's liabilities are more than he can make good, he's in a very awkward, not to say dangerous, position." (Walter started in his saddle.) "It may happen to any of us, you know; but that don't make it a bit less

disagreeable. My dear Brooke, will you allow me to talk to you as a friend?"

Mr. Multiple was opening the trenches, you see. So to speak, he was completing his first parallel. The early operations required quite as much caution as the subsequent advancement of the siege. He knew the value of an ally, and this, if he could get him, would be a precious one indeed.

"You're very good," answered the other, with some suspicion; adding bitterly, "I'm sure I want one, and a staunch one, just now."

No man alive could have looked more sincere than Multiple, when he replied—

"I'll stick by you through thick and thin, Brooke; but it's no use disguising, you've got some very rough weather before you. Unavoidable expenses, possible losses, difficulties about ready money, perhaps a bill or two coming due." Here he paused to give his so-called friend the full benefit of the thrust, and satisfied himself the while that his fieldworks were advancing rapidly. "Promotion, it may be, to purchase; to say nothing of the thousand driblets in which money is always filtering away. We might help one another, Brooke, though, if we pulled in the same boat. But, first of all, I've a scheme for you I was thinking of the whole way down in the train. You're a good-looking fellow, pleasant in society, popular with the women. Why don't you marry?"

"I've never been asked," replied Walter demurely; adding, however, "I've thought of it, too, more than once. I'm afraid it's the only way left. Did you mean me to marry anybody in particular, my good fellow, or to pick from the lot, and take the best? Hang it! she must be a lady, though. I couldn't afford to drive a half-bred one!"

Multiple set his teeth, and smiled. On his face was the expression of a man who has captured something that writhes, and moans, and struggles, but that he is determined not to set free.

"I know a lady as thoroughbred as any in England, with plenty of money too, that the world says would marry you to-morrow if you asked her. Give her a chance, man, at least, of saying 'No.' She don't live far from here. Do it this afternoon!"

"I suppose I can guess what you mean," answered Walter; "but I don't think old Waywarden would stand it. I've nothing to settle on her but myself. Valuable, no doubt, but not convertible, you see."

"Waywarden will do whatever she tells him," said the

other. "A man with an only daughter always does. I believe he thinks there's nobody worthy of Lady Julia, and he'd grudge giving her to one fellow just as much as another."

"It's not a bad idea, Multiple," said Walter. "I've often thought before that it might pay. There's the mother, though. I'd forgotten her. She'll settle *my* business, I know, in two words. I think I see her face when they talk about anything less than a duke for Ju!"

"The mother's the best friend you've got," answered Multiple. "Depend upon it, a woman who has been such a beauty as Lady Waywarden don't like going about with a grown-up daughter. Nethersole is still at Eton, and a precious stupid young dog I hear your future brother-in-law is, Brooke. If Lady Julia was married, people would forget the mamma had a daughter. She'd fancy herself quite young, and begin going about again."

Here Multiple fell into an error very common amongst men of his calibre who are *in* what is called the best society without being *of* it. They are apt to lay down conventional rules for the conduct of a class with which they are not intimately acquainted, drawn from what they imagine they would themselves do if similarly situated. These maxims are for the most part fallacies, grounded on a narrow view of human nature, and ignoring most unphilosophically the obvious fact that in civilised nations the highest and the lowest ranks are least of all impelled to repress or dissemble their real feelings.

Walter, though with far less experience, knew better; but men are easily persuaded of what they wish, and he only observed in a languid tone, "I suppose I'd better not say anything about settlements!"

"Settlements?" repeated his friend thoughtfully. "I think I can advise you what to do even when it comes to that. Insist that everything shall be settled on the lady herself. Vow that you know nothing, and care less about the money part of the business. Declare you won't touch a penny in the event of her death; that you can't bear to talk about it, and feel you wouldn't survive her a week. Then wind up with your own expectations, your father's intentions, his bad health, the unlikelihood of your brother ever marrying, adding that nobody is half good enough for her, and inferring that you are better than anyone else."

"Why, you do it so well you must have been practising on your own account," laughed Walter. "Are you going to

put your foot in it too, old fellow? Do you want to see me in the same mess as yourself?"

"If I did, I hope you would back me up as well as I have backed you," answered Multiple, with a covert smile. "Fair play is a jewel, and I think you ought to promise me that."

"Of course, of course!" said the other carelessly; adding, "Here we are at the house, and Helen, by Jove, ready dressed for a walk. Go in and do the civil whilst I take this horse round to the stable."

Multiple was delighted to comply. Having established himself on a sufficiently familiar footing at Bridlemere, he lost no opportunity of making the ground thoroughly good that he had already gained. He wished to glide insensibly, but surely, from the pleasant acquaintance into the trusted and confidential friend. That character he hoped to change eventually for something more closely connected still; and Helen's manner of late had given him some encouragement, the more acceptable from its contrast to the obvious dislike with which she had received him at first.

The truth is, that living as she did so much alone, and in constant attendance on her father, the society of an agreeable, intelligent man could not but be an acquisition. Now, Multiple had a fund of everyday information, which, when he chose, he could impart in a pleasant, easy manner that enchanted the squire and amused his daughter. Helen required, just at present, what the French call a *distraction*, and anything was to be caught at that took her out of her own thoughts. She began to miss Multiple's anecdotes the days he was detained in London, and to look for his arrival, with his budget of news, as an event in the uninteresting *routine* of her life. She also had to stand up for him against Jack, that gentleman, though usually unprejudiced, having taken a strong dislike to his brother's new friend.

"He's not the right sort, Nell," he would say to his sister, in moments of confidence, at her flower-beds or amongst her plants. "I don't know what it is about the fellow. He's decently behaved, I allow, and disgustingly civil, but somehow he's not all right, Nell. Hang him! with his curls, and his rings, and his soft white hands; I should never be surprised to hear he was a ticket-of-leaver!"

Of course, defending a man causes a lady to look more leniently on his faults. Neither is it against his interest that she should seldom see anyone else, except her brothers, in the shape of a gentleman. By degrees Helen came to consider

Mr. Multiple an obliging, accommodating person, rather amusing besides, and to opine there might be some good in him if only anybody would take the trouble to bring it out. Therefore, when he was ushered into the library, where she sat by her father, she gave him her hand with a pleasant smile and a cordiality of manner that in so quiet a lady was extremely reassuring.

The squire had eaten his early dinner, and gone off into his usual afternoon doze. He slept so sound that the visitor's entrance failed to wake him. The conversation, therefore, had to be carried on in whispers so as not to disturb the invalid, and this restraint also gave a character of friendly intimacy to the meeting.

Helen was dressed for a walk—small hat, slender boots, striped petticoat, and well-fitting gloves, as before. The costume reminded Multiple of the first time he met her, several weeks ago. His heart swelled with triumph when he thought how well he had used the intervening period, and what a game he had before him if he only played it out.

He loved her, you see, after his own fashion, as the wolf loves the lamb, the eagle the kid, the Turkish Pasha his last pink-cheeked, hazel-eyed, auburn-haired purchase from the Circassian dealer. Nay, perhaps his love was keener than any of these, for it was dashed with a stinging sense of inferiority that strengthened his efforts with all the energy of revenge, and imparted a diabolical zest to his anticipations of the triumph he had resolved to win.

Miss Brooke loved both her brothers as a well-conducted young woman should. She had promised to meet Jack this afternoon on his way home from the farm, and that walk would be the one treat of her whole day. She pined for the fresh air, too, for its own sake, as those do who spend most of their time in a sick-room. She thought it hard that their visitor's arrival should deprive her of this necessary indulgence. She wondered what Walter was about that he did not come to her relief. The squire's servant was at the door, waiting to take his usual turn of attendance, and the afternoon was wearing away fast. It would be rude to desert her guest; but there could surely be no harm in asking him to accompany her part of the way, and leaving a message for Walter to follow. Multiple ought to have known by this frank proceeding that she could hardly be in love with him. The proposal, however, in order not to wake the squire, had to be made and accepted in a whisper. Multiple felt like a winner as they emerged together from the hall-door, and took their

way across the park, winding in and out through the old elms, crushing the dank, brown fern beneath their feet, and disturbing the deer only enough to make them stare attentive, shake their heads, and move stately on to continue browsing in another glade. He knew right well how such warfare should be waged, and, notwithstanding that his feelings were really interested, never lost his head for a moment; so he talked on indifferent matters while they were in sight of the windows, and was only a little graver and quieter than usual. Presently, getting farther into the solitude of the park, he grew silent. She remarked it, wondered what was coming, and walked rather faster in consequence. He broke through his reserve abruptly. He wished to startle her, and succeeded.

"Miss Brooke!" said he, "I am placed in a very awkward position. I require your sympathy and assistance."

The large dark eyes turned on him with an expression of unfeigned wonder; but his manner, though agitated, was respectful, even deferential; and Helen, with all her shyness, had no lack of courage. The two qualities, indeed, often go together.

"I am scarcely equal to advising, far less assisting, a person of your experience," she answered calmly; adding, with a smile, "My sympathy, I fear, will do you but little good."

"It is all I ask for, nevertheless," said he tenderly. "If I knew what you wished me to do, I should have less difficulty in making up my mind; at least, I should not scruple for a moment in yielding my own opinion to yours. I hope you will give me credit so far, Miss Brooke."

"I do not think I quite understand you," she replied, a little puzzled as to what the man could be driving at. For Multiple was too old a player to show his hand at the commencement of the game—but wondering also why Walter had not overtaken them, and wishing that Jack would speedily break the *tête-à-tête* by returning from the farm.

"I am in possession of a secret," said he frankly, "affecting the honour of a family for which I have the greatest regard. Indeed, for certain members of that family I should be proud to make any sacrifice they might require. To conceal my knowledge of this secret, places me in the position of one who participates in a crime. To disclose it would entail utterly and irremediably the social ruin of my friend. Miss Brooke, this is my dilemma. Help me out of it."

"Fais ce que dois, advienne ce que pourra!" answered

Pressure.

Helen proudly. "I should think a man's own honour was the best guide on such occasions as these."

He looked at her with a pitying admiration she remembered, and was grateful for afterwards.

"If we could stick to that maxim," said he gently, "it would be better for us all. In this case, I should have to bid my friend good-bye, and must make up my mind to see him lose his position, his profession, his acquaintance, his future, his good name, everything that makes life worth having. I could not bear him to be pointed at for a swindler; and yet, if I do not screen him, this must be the result. Oh! Miss Brooke, speak a word in the cause of mercy! You must have perceived long ago that with me your will is law."

Helen was getting very stately and a little frightened.

"Forgive me again," she said coldly, "for remarking that I cannot see how all this affects me. Shall we turn back, Mr. Multiple? Those clouds look very like rain."

He changed his manner now for a graver and sterner air, stopping short to face her while he spoke.

"It so far affects you, Miss Brooke," said he, "that the action I deplore was committed by a person who is very near and dear to you, and of whose honour you are as tender as of your own."

She turned deadly pale, trembling all over, and scarcely conscious of the action, sat down on a fallen tree, and looked up in her companion's face with a mute, piteous agony that seemed helplessly to await the blow.

"That person," continued Multiple in the same tone, "has robbed his intimate friend of a large sum of money, several hundreds, by a trick combining palpable misrepresentation with actual fraud—by something which, if not in a judicial, is, at least in a social point of view, tantamount to forgery. That person has placed himself without the pale even of those whom the world conventionally calls honest men, and that person is—forgive me, Miss Brooke; Helen, forgive me—your brother, Walter Brooke."

A little broken cry—a moan as if she had been suddenly stricken to the heart, escaped her. Then she sprang to her feet, and on her pale fair face was written scorn, defiance, indignation, and a strange wild gleam of relief. It was not her brother's name she had feared to hear from those stern unsparing lips; she faced him as a man faces another whom he is about to strike; nay, she clenched her slender hand and spoke out in loud, full, vehement tones.

"It's a lie," she said, "a base and slanderous lie! You

dared not have told him so yourself. Is it gentlemanlike, Mr. Multiple. Good Heavens! is it manly to come to me with this false, abominable tale? I am only a girl, a weak girl, so you are safe enough; but if I were half as strong as my brothers you—you—would be down there on the grass, at my feet."

"I wish you *would* strike me," said he very sadly, "for I feel too keenly what a cruel blow I am inflicting on you. Miss Brooke, strike, but hear me. Do you think, *can* you think, I entered on this painful subject to give you annoyance? You, for whom I would do anything, suffer anything, forego anything. Whom else can I consult? Would you have me go to the squire, to Sir Archibald, to your elder brother, himself the soul of honour, though he scarce does me justice? I *must* mean well, Miss Brooke, when I could run such a risk as this of offending you."

Of course, her tears were beginning to flow. The reaction had come on, and she gave him her hand almost penitently. In her agitation she hardly knew, when she withdrew it, that he had put it to his lips.

"Forgive me," she said. "Mr. Multiple, I had no right to doubt your friendship. I will endeavour to listen calmly. Surely there must be some explanation. It cannot, it CANNOT be true."

"I have the proofs, Miss Brooke," he replied, in the same sad, sympathising tone, "and I am but too thankful they have fallen into my hands. Were I the only person in the secret the matter would be simple enough. Unfortunately, there is another individual concerned. One with whom I have had many dealings in money matters — grasping, covetous, unscrupulous. His silence must be purchased; and I cannot hope that any of the feelings which influence me will have the slightest effect on him."

Shattered, surprised, agitated as she was, Helen collected herself with an effort, and asked calmly for a detailed statement of the accusation against her brother, listening to Multiple's account with fixed attention, and putting here and there such questions as showed she escaped none of the pain it caused her from being bewildered by the blow.

Multiple, of course, gave his own version, varying but little, however, from the actual facts that had come to his knowledge. When he arrived at the discovery of the two corresponding bills, and his subsequent conversation with Rags, she stopped him.

"You have got them both," she exclaimed. "Mr. Multiple,

for all our sakes—for *my* sake—you will keep them in your own possession at any sacrifice!"

"For your sake, Miss Brooke," he answered, once more taking her hand, "I will spare one who is dear to you, though in so doing I am within a hair's-breadth of compounding a felony. The other person I mentioned is under obligations to me; that is to say, I hold his bond for large sums of money. By cancelling the debt I can purchase his silence. Understand me, Helen Brooke, to do this I must sacrifice half my fortune, and I will do it only for your sake."

She looked about her scared, turning her head from side to side like a wild animal caught in a trap. She had time even in that helpless, wretched moment to review the whole details of the position. To imagine her father's sorrow and its certain effect on his health should this great disgrace be ever brought to light. Sir Archibald's agony of shame—Uncle Archie, the soul of honour, the chivalrous, scrupulous gentleman to whom the mere suspicion of a stain would be humiliating as a blow. Jack's utter despair when he lost his faith in his brother. He would feel it, she knew, even more than she did; and poor Jack had so much to grieve, so much to worry him. Of Walter himself she could not bear to think. Nor was this the worst—the reputation of their family was endangered; the escutcheon they cherished so proudly was threatened with defacement. At all risks, ay, at every sacrifice, the honour of the Brookes must be preserved.

Could she misunderstand the nature of this friendly intervention, the price demanded for his assistance, who was walking so quiet, so respectful, yet so uncompromising, at her side? He seemed resolved there should be no misconception of his meaning. They were standing together near the fallen tree, her hand was again in his, and rested there passively, for she was quite unconscious of his touch. Though not a drop of rain fell the clouds had gathered dark above their heads, and she saw everything about her curiously distinct and in detail, yet through a strange lurid light, as though the atmosphere were tinged with saffron hues. Even the bare forked branch of a distant tree against the sky arrested her outward attention with a persistency that was almost distressing, though her real inner self, as she knew too well all the time, was a long way from here, and far back into the past. Her face was white, even to the lips, and her delicate features quivered and worked painfully, but she set the small teeth hard, and bore her head up nobly with a defiant courage that could not have been surpassed by the

first Sir Geoffrey beset amongst the Ironsides at Naseby, striking dogged and desperate for God and for the King. Her companion did not look her in the face, his own eyes flashed and sparkled, but he kept them on the ground; his cheek was flushed and glowing, his frame trembled with delight and triumph, and intense passionate longing, which he dignified with the name of love. His arm would fain have stolen round her waist, but instinct itself told him this was no time for such familiarity, and it was but a cold gloved hand he pressed once more to his burning lips, while the stern brief accents in which he urged his suit grated harshly on her ear.

"Miss Brooke! Helen! Speak! Is it agreed?"

"Agreed," she repeated, and let him take both her helpless hands in his, and bent her marble forehead once to meet his kiss. And so Frank Multiple and Miss Brooke were engaged.

Engaged! Alas! She knew too well what it meant. It meant a new life, new interests, new duties, the charge of another's happiness as well as of her own. All that is most enticing and most precious to a woman's heart, with its keen desire for appropriation, when glorified by love, all that terrifies and depresses it most when expediency rather than inclination has forged the handcuffs. Ah! the grim iron strikes chill to the bone bare of its silken covering. True that with many of us the silk wears through ere long, but still the limbs have got used to the fetter, and callous to its touch. I pity no dreamer's disillusion, for it is the condition of his dream, but it *is* hard to forego the dream altogether. Not even in fancy to have basked in the magic beams. It is bad enough to lose the luminous phantom that so dazzled all our senses, but worse still never so much as to have seen it glide from within our grasp.

Helen must give up home and kindred now. Was it this reflection that seemed to weigh like lead about her heart? I think the sacrifice she felt most keenly was not of the real but of the impossible. I think she had cherished a vague longing for that which could not be, so she had taught herself to feel, and prized the vision more because her reason told her it must never reach fulfilment. Now that her own act had destroyed every vestige, it did not seem so impracticable after all. Why must she be haunted by that figure walking thoughtfully across the park, pausing amongst the trees to look its last upon the house, and then turn sorrowfully away? Why must she see a girl with a pale face and dark hair

pushed back, on her knees, in a deserted room, weeping, longing, praying? And how had the prayer been answered? She could not, she must not, she *dared* not think of it now.

She turned to her affianced husband and wondered how she ought to feel towards him. Was this heavy, hopeless, grudging effort at gratitude a return for his devotion? Had he not offered her his all, and was it not accepted? She shuddered and sickened to think how little she could give him in return.

They were going home now, for like a wounded forest creature she had instinctively set her face that way, and he walked by her side grave, triumphant, scheming even then, thinking less of her youth, her beauty, her maiden dignity, her gentle loving heart, than of his own ambition, and the great stride he had to-day accomplished in that which he considered the journey of life. Sometimes, though, he glanced at the slender feet that stole in and out beneath the gaudy petticoat, and then his dark cheek flushed warm, and his downcast eyes sparkled and glowed with a lurid light.

They spoke but little, and on indifferent subjects. Since they had agreed to become one, a wall seemed to have risen between them, and, strange to say, he felt the restraint more irksome than the girl. Perhaps her great distress left no room for so petty a sensation as mere discomfort. Their situation was not the least what either of them had expected, and if Jack Brooke coming back from the farm could have overtaken the engaged couple, it would have been a great relief to both.

Perhaps the sight of her old home gave her courage; perhaps she felt that a last effort must be made; not at escape—no, that was now impossible—but for a reprieve. They were almost at the door when she turned full upon Frank Multiple, and said in a calm measured voice that surprised herself, "I have one request to make that I think you will hardly deny me. Our bargain—our engagement, I should say—must not be declared to-day. You know my father's state of health. You must leave me to decide on the fitting time for asking his approval. Do you consent?"

He tried to answer playfully, fondly, to affect the raptures proper on such an occasion, but the phrases would not come, and though he was provoked at his own cowardice, he shrank from meeting her eye. He made a weak snatch at her hand, an awkward futile effort to detain her, but she passed on as if unconscious of his presence, and walked upstairs with a slow and stately step to the door of her own chamber. God

help her when she got there! It would have been a brave man who had followed her across the threshold.

And Multiple, left standing at the hall-door, ground a curse savagely between his teeth, then looked up as if relieved by her absence from unbearable restraint, pulled out a gorgeous cigar-case, embroidered by hands less pure than Helen's, but perhaps no less kind and gentle in a cause they loved, selected a cigar, and lighting it, paced up and down the gravel, and spoke to his own heart in bitter, malicious, measured syllables.

"We shall see, my fair proud lady. We shall see. Your turn to-day; mine to-morrow. Love me! Why should she? I have had enough of that folly; but I know something better than such child's play, and I think, considering all things, I have not bought my bargain too dear. She called it a bargain herself. Do you think *that* escaped me, my lady? If you do, you'll find yourself d——d well mistaken when we come to settle accounts. I'll have that haughty high-born beauty of yours all for my own. Why, that alone is worth more than I need give Pounder to hold his tongue. I'll have that cold white forehead down, down to the very dust; and as for your heart, curse it, let it break if it won't bend; for you're mine now, body and soul, and, by Heaven! you shall find it out. And yet, and yet—blast her! I wish she would love me a little, were it only for half an hour."

Then, as the tobacco asserted its soothing influence, his countenance brightened, his swollen features regained their usual composure. He never acted on impulse, though his passions were naturally violent. He was a little ashamed of his late outbreak.

"What a fool I am," said he, laughing honestly enough, "to put myself out for nothing. What would a fellow have? Here I am with the game in my own hand, winning every trick, by Jove! and my deal."

CHAPTER XX

RECOIL

THERE are all sorts of wooers in the ranks, from buxom May to bleak December. Some men, like Don Quixote, take the matter *au grand sérieux*, and to such, indeed, the important question must constitute an awful moment of their lives. Others again, Irishmen, I believe, especially, rejoicing in a wonderful mixture of good faith, *bonhomie*, and that reckless audacity which they affirm to proceed from constitutional shyness, request a lady to marry them with an easy affability, just as they would ask her to dance; and seem as little affected by acceptance or refusal in the one case as in the other. Levity, indifference, and the gaiety of an untouched heart, have doubtless their advantages. To a looker-on they generally seem secure of the game; but women, I imagine, must have some secret test, by which they ascertain the value of a suitor's professions, distinguishing the ring of the true metal from the jingle of the false. Though not always wise enough to act upon it, they are seldom misled by this mysterious instinct; and my own belief is, that each of them knows exactly what you think of her the very first time she sets eyes upon you. It is this intuitive perception of our weakness that gives her such advantage in a contest, like most others, gained by the mistake of an adversary. I cannot quite subscribe to the maxim, that "faint heart never won fair lady." I think if she cares to be won, it must be a very faint heart, indeed, to which she will not give enough encouragement to make it go in for the prize; whilst, although persistency and good fortune, or in other words, opportunity and importunity may do a great deal, they are not infallible, and that one refusal, which is proverbially no rebuff, may, on repetition, grow to be a very decided ebullition of hatred and disgust. Sir Dinadam, in the old chronicle, with his jests and japes, his far-fetched witticisms that made Arthur and Guenevere laugh so heartily they "might hardly endure to sit upon

their chairs," with his *débonnair* bearing, and his courtly glance roving free from dame to damsel, but settling fairly on none, might, indeed, win smiles as many as he broke lances; but I doubt if the whitest bosoms in the court of the Blameless King heaved sighs so deep for him as for love-lorn Tristrem, or for Lancelot, the brave, the gentle, and the saddened; eating his own heart in utter silence; looking "stol'n wise" on one he might never claim; wrestling with the passion, so sweet though guilty; so hopeless though returned; that was alike her punishment and his own.

Not a paladin of them all, however, had he risen straight from the wine-cup at the Round Table, could have galloped off a-wooing more gaily than did Walter Brooke, out of the stableyard at Bridlemere in the direction of Tollesdale. Multiple's advice sank deep, encouraging as it did the hopes he had now cherished for some time. He was not a man to let the iron cool before he struck it, and ere his companion had entered the house, and made his bow to Helen, the hussar had changed his mind about spending the afternoon at home. He turned his unwilling charger from the stable-door, but that good horse no sooner felt the soft elastic turf beneath his feet, than he broke into an easy gallop, seeming to participate in the hopes, as in the haste, of his rider.

There are some expeditions that must be undertaken in a hurry, or not at all. If a fortress is to be carried by a *coup-de-main*, it will not do to waste time in lengthening the ladders and measuring the ditch; better run in and force the position pellmell. If you mean to ride at water, the sooner you set about it the better for man and horse; the longer you look, the less you will both like it. And if you want to marry an heiress, you should ask the question, and press for the answer at once, lest a livelier suitor cut in before you, and give you the candle to hold while he walks off with the game.

Walter never slackened pace till he saw the square, substantial front of Tollesdale mansion-house looming through its surrounding woods, suggestive of wealth, and station, and domestic comfort, and all that a man who is *not* in love connects with matrimony. Even then he would have galloped to the very threshold, but that passing the double doors of a deep well-littered farmyard, he was brought up by the cheerful voice of his prospective father-in-law.

"You seem in a hurry, Walter," shouted Lord Waywarden, interrupting his occupation to stop his friend. "You needn't

fear to be late for luncheon in *that* house, as long as my lady is at home. Why, man, you send him along as if you were riding to catch hounds!"

His lordship was over his gaiters in the rich yellow straw. His farm-book was under his arm, his pencil between his teeth. He was engaged in the congenial operation of poking and punching a fat bullock about the tail, to ascertain the beast's chance of an agricultural prize. He invited Walter to dismount and inspect the Leviathan.

"Not his legs, my good fellow; not his legs," exclaimed his lordship, laughing heartily at the gravity with which Walter, who was not without a certain dry humour, took his gloves off, and proceeded to pass his hand down the animal's sinews below the knee. "Do you suppose that I am training him for the Middlesworth Handicap; or if I were, do you think he looks as if he could win? Perhaps you would like to have a saddle on him, and feel his action round the paddock? Come, you'll be none the worse for a lesson about stock. We'll go round the pigs. I've a black sow I should like to show you, that's as sure of the gold medal as if she had it round her neck. Look at her! Fair Rosamond, my bailiff calls her. There, I think you'll allow I have bred a beauty at last!"

Fair Rosamond, who was all throat and paunch, with a delicate little snout and eyes choked in fat, gave no symptoms of vitality beyond a stertorous snore, and looked, indeed, as if she must die of sheer apoplexy before the day of the show.

Walter asked meekly whether it would be necessary to feel her too?

Lord Waywarden's cheery laugh rang once more amongst the very rafters of the out-buildings.

'You'll never make a farmer," said he, "and I suppose you don't want to learn. But having caught you down here it would be scarcely fair to give you a benefit, particularly as you take to it so kindly. You must have come to ask for something, Walter. I never knew a fellow give another a leg on to his hobby, unless he wanted something out of the rider."

Lord Waywarden spoke jestingly, of course. He imagined that his young friend might require some little favour connected with fishing-rights, pheasants' eggs, the dry-nursing of foxhound puppies, or any one of the thousand little matters in which country gentlemen can be of service to each other. He was something more than surprised when Walter told

him, in a few modest but outspoken words, the object of his visit.

Something more than surprised, yet not altogether displeased. He liked the hussar, personally, none the worse—knowing him to be a bold rider and a good shot—for certain little affectations of dandyism that reminded him of his own youth. He approved of the connection with near neighbours, and a family so influential in the county. He had a vague suspicion, too, that Julia was fond of him; and this would have outweighed almost every other consideration in his lordship's mind. The boy had nothing, of course; *nothing*, with Lord Waywarden, might have meant anything under two thousand a year; but he had always understood Sir Archibald would make him his heir; and Sir Archibald, everybody said, must have saved enormously! In the meantime he must stretch a point for Julia. After all, he had but Julia and Nethersole in the world. Besides, he was pleased with the manly, though diffident, tone in which the consent had been asked; and approved highly of the suitor's honourable conduct in appealing to the father before he addressed the girl.

Walter, who had played this, his last card, with something of the gambler's desperation, could hardly believe his ears, when my lord bade him go up to the house and try his luck with my lady.

"I don't mean the thing is settled, my boy," said he, grasping the young man's hand; "but I do mean, that if you can get my lady's consent, and Julia is willing, of course, I'll take it into consideration, and see what can be done. You're both quite young, you know, and can afford to wait. Probably, for that very reason, you're in a devil of a hurry. I know my lady is very ambitious about Ju, and the girl's fit to be a queen, in my opinion; still she may be induced to listen to you; for I tell you, you're in her good books. Only put it as a favour, you know; put it as a favour. If my lady gets upon the high ropes, let her dance till she's tired; she'll soon come down again, but she likes people to say 'Yes' to her, just at first. God bless you, my boy! and good luck to you! I think you would be good to Julia, and that is everything with me—above rank and riches, and all besides in the world!"

So Walter, much encouraged, remounted to ride up to the house, and Lord Waywarden, looking after him, shook his head more than once, while he pictured to himself his countess, cold and stately in her morning-room. "I don't envy him his job," he muttered, returning to the farm-book and the fat pigs; but he could not settle to anything now,

for thinking of his child. To put his own oar in at such a crisis he felt would do more harm than good, so his lordship thought he had better walk across the park, and inspect some lately purchased Herefords.

"I believe it will come off after all," said Walter to himself, as he rang the door-bell, and asked if Lady Waywarden was at home. He had scarcely yet recovered his first unexpected success, and felt that to stop now in his career would be inexcusable.

Nevertheless, he dreaded the interview not a little. He envied Mr. Silke's composure, as that immovable man ushered him through two or three drawing-rooms, with blazing fires, hothouse flowers, and, indeed, a hothouse atmosphere, to the door of her ladyship's own snuggery. Here, I think, if he had been really in love he would have bolted outright; but he only fancied he was, so he made a plunge, and went in.

Notwithstanding the climate she affected, Lady Waywarden's fingers were very cold when she shook hands with him. The chill seemed to run up his elbows and curdle about the nape of his neck. She had been writing, of course, but she laid her pen down with the utmost politeness, and inquired after his family, *seriatim*, in a tone that implied the most complete indifference to his answers, adding, as she stretched her cold white hand to the bell, "Of course you'll have some luncheon, Mr. Brooke? I believe it is hardly over yet."

Now Walter had been collecting his energies for this, the great difficulty of his undertaking, and a bright idea struck him like an inspiration, even while her ladyship was speaking. "This woman," he thought, "must be startled into a consent. Conventional forms and the restrictions of polite society are the elements in which she lives; but she has not seen a man in earnest for twenty years, and will not know how to defend herself against a bit of high-wrought feeling and romance. It will come all the better, too, from me, whom she has hitherto believed such another as herself. Here goes! I suppose a man may stoop to conquer as well as a woman!"

Accordingly, ere she could reach the bell, he had seized the folds of her rich velvet skirt, and was down on his knees, in the very whitest spot of the hearth-rug, at her feet. Lady Waywarden had, certainly, never been so astonished in her life before.

First, she thought he was mad, and feared him; then that he was in love with her himself—poor young man! and pitied him, though reprovingly. Lastly, she made out what he wanted, and felt interested in spite of her cold worldly heart.

"Nobody can help me but you, Lady Waywarden," said he, pressing her dress against his lips; "I have nobody to consult, nobody to advise, nobody to pity me. Ever since I can remember, I have looked upon you as something nobler and wiser, and more beautiful than a woman; perhaps it is this very feeling that tortures me now, for love of one who is like you in body, and mind, and intellect, and heart. I have nothing to urge in my own favour; nothing to give me value in your eyes; nothing to say but this: that I love your daughter, Lady Julia, so wildly, so madly, so fondly, that if you can find it in your heart to be pitiless, and go against me to-day, I shall never lift up my head again!"

Then he went and sat down away from her, leaning his brow against a buhl table, as if ashamed of his ebullition.

"I *am* surprised!—I freely confess I am surprised!" said Lady Waywarden, lifting both her cold white hands in the attitude of a mediæval saint, and hoping sincerely that, in his agitation, he might not brush some old china off the table with his elbow. "Compose yourself, Mr. Brooke. This violence is perhaps unnecessary, after all. Am I to understand that your declaration is to be considered a proposal in form for the hand of my daughter, Lady Julia Treadwell?"

Walter intimated energetically enough that was what he meant, hinting, at the same time, that the young lady's likeness to her mother constituted her real value in his eyes.

"There are difficulties, Mr. Brooke; you cannot but see there are great difficulties," continued her ladyship, spreading out her robes, and seating herself royally in an arm-chair, as if it were a throne. "The match is hardly suitable in a worldly point of view, even were all other considerations satisfactorily arranged. At the same time, if my daughter's happiness were involved, I should be the last person to stand in its way, as too many mothers do, for mere mercenary motives. Of course Julia would require a suitable establishment, though it is extremely premature to discuss anything of that kind at present."

"Whatever you thought suitable, Lady Waywarden, must be right. Your good sense and good taste will be invaluable in all such matters," answered Walter, looking up from the table.

He found the game easier than he expected, and, like a skilful billiard player, resolved now he had got a break to make a good score off the balls.

Lady Waywarden reflected for a few moments, during which, I believe, her thoughts travelled back to her own image

in a long glass, dressed in white and orange blossoms, under a bridal veil. Then she asked, with a sigh—

"Have you any reason to believe my daughter's feelings are already interested in this, your very—very—unexpected proposal, Mr. Brooke?"

There was a winning hazard to play for here, and he made it without fail.

"I would not have even hinted at such a thing," said he, raising her ladyship's hand to his lips, "till I had consulted my first friend!"

"I must say that is very honourable—very honourable, indeed," answered the countess, with a little provoking consciousness, notwithstanding all her approbation, that she herself, when Julia's age, would have liked her own opinion to be asked first. "I cannot but admire your prudence and delicacy; indeed, it is most unusual in so young a man. And I have been told—excuse me, Mr. Brooke—that you have been a little—what shall I say? rather—in short—not altogether steadier than your neighbours?"

"I never had a mother's teaching, Lady Waywarden. You must think of that, and make allowances. The other boys of my own age used to write home to their mothers when they wanted anything, and I could scarcely remember mine. I often envy Nethersole, when I think that with all his many advantages, he possesses in your care the very greatest of all. I might have been so different if she had lived."

He really thought so for the moment, and his voice shook with an emotion that was only half put on. It was a splendid stroke, boldly conceived and boldly executed. I believe it won him the game.

Lady Waywarden's words came huskily when she answered. She had not wept for so many years that the tears got no farther than her throat, but they were there sure enough when she thought of the poor little motherless boy at school, and her own son's letter received but yesterday, asking for a variety of articles totally unconnected with his studies.

"You cannot expect a definite answer at once, Mr. Brooke," she said, surprised at her inmost heart by her own tendency to acquiesce in so romantic a proceeding, and a little vain of her unworldliness besides. "The thing is altogether so sudden. You have taken me so completely by surprise, and, of course, Lord Waywarden must be consulted."

Walter was far too good a player, and knew the table too well, to confess that he had already obtained a conditional consent from that nobleman. He took her ladyship's hand once more and kissed it reverentially.

"If I have only you on my side," said he, "I am sure of victory. I shall be the happiest man in the world, and owe it all to your kind heart."

"Well, if it depends on me," answered Lady Waywarden, "I will not vote against you; I can promise that. Now you may go and see Julia, if you like. I suppose you don't care about any luncheon. You are almost sure to find her in the conservatory."

Lady Julia *was* in the conservatory, sure enough, ostensibly snipping the dead leaves off sundry plants with a pair of garden scissors. I believe no atmosphere can be wholesome when raised to an artificial temperature, and this may have been the reason why her colour went and came so variably, and her heart beat so much faster than could be accounted for by the mere act of stooping over a flower-pot.

She had heard the door-bell ring, and meeting Mr. Silke as she left the dining-room, where she had finished luncheon, inquired, with pardonable curiosity, the name of the visitor.

"Mr. Brooke, my lady," answered that well-drilled domestic, softly and imperturbably, as he would have announced the Emperor of Morocco, or any other notability. "He asked for her ladyship, and is gone into the morning-room."

How can I tell what she was thinking of? or why she started, turning red and pale? I believe she was going upstairs to put on her things for a walk, but she changed her mind, perhaps opining it looked like rain, and retraced her steps to the blue drawing-room, whence she proceeded into the conservatory, and snipped off a dozen or so of very promising shoots, without discovering the mischief she was about.

A man's step on the tesselated floor made her look up, and her countenance fell visibly ere Walter reached her side. Nevertheless, her confusion had completely vanished when she accosted him by name, asking cordially and kindly how he had left them all at Bridlemere.

You have seen a child in a white frock hunting a butterfly round a garden: from clove to carnation, from hollyhock to heliotrope, from rose to mignonette, the pretty painted thing quivers and settles, and flutters off again into the summer sky,

just as the hot little hand is in the act of closing on its prize. The pursuit, like that of pleasure, is endless, enticing, disappointing. After mirth, effort, failure, and vexation, the disgusted little hunter generally sits down to cry.

Lady Julia was like the butterfly. From flower to flower she flitted; from subject to subject she roved, and Walter could not fix her; could not drive her into a corner; could not get her on a topic that might give him the opportunity he required.

Perhaps she suspected him, and fought off from maiden modesty; perhaps she enjoyed his discomfiture, and tantalised him for sheer amusement. She plied him with questions on practical matters that no amount of ingenuity could twist into a romantic shape; she told him anecdotes fresh from London by that morning's post with a volubility that left him no chance of getting in a word; and he could not but laugh, in spite of himself, at her sarcastic comments and quaint powers of narration. All these artifices, however, only increased his determination to capture this golden-winged butterfly; and, indeed, the prize looked sufficiently alluring to have tempted even an older, and wiser, and less necessitous man.

She was dressed in a very dark-coloured velvet, adapted, as she considered, for out-of-door work and country wear, which, fitting quite close to her bust and shoulders, fell in long ample folds below the waist, giving her beautifully moulded form an appearance of greater height than it possessed. Under a little white lace collar she wore a broad light green ribbon—the only bit of colour in her whole dress—very becoming, as doubtless she well knew, to the delicate bloom of her complexion, and the glory of her rich chestnut hair.

The diamond eyes gleamed and sparkled, bright as the jewels in her perfect little ears; and the clear fair face, with its well-cut features, broke into sunny smiles with every changing topic that arose, but there was a strange resolute expression about the rosy lips, that deepened and deepened, as Walter's tone grew more and more serious and affectionate. With all her beauty—youthful, saucy, and attractive though it was—she looked a lady who could depend upon herself in any emergency, either of body or mind.

"Bless me!" thought Walter, "how like she is to the print in Jack's bedroom!"

It was strange that this resemblance should have struck him now for the first time. There was no leisure, however, to follow out the train of ideas such a discovery might have

originated, for he saw his opportunity at this very moment, and hastened to take advantage of it.

Lady Julia was reaching up, with the garden scissors, to amputate some rusty shoots from a pendent plant with a long Latin name she could not, she said, have pronounced in a month. Her waist looked particularly taper and inviting in this attitude. His arm was round it in an instant, and the scissors fell on the varnished pavement with a clang.

She disengaged herself in a rapid, snake-like twirl, not agitated nor frightened, nor even astonished, only—as he could not but perceive to his great discomfiture—somewhat amused.

"This is a bad floor for waltzing, Mr. Brooke," said she composedly; "and the place altogether too hot for a dance. Let us walk back into the drawing-room!"

He knew the match was lost now: the player's instinct seldom deceives him in such matters. Nevertheless, he resolved to finish the game.

"Hear me, Lady Julia," said he, trying to take her hand, which, however, she did not yield, keeping him, as he afterwards observed, at "practising distance." "Only three words. I will not detain you long. You—you spoke of names just now; could you not be persuaded to change yours?"

Of course, she knew as well as he did what was coming. She ought to have blushed, hesitated, cried a little—how can I tell? Perhaps even fainted away. If so, she was by no means perfect in her part, for she did not so much as turn red, and her eyes gleamed maliciously, while she asked—

"Change it? I don't know that I should. But for what?"

"Would you hate," said he gently—"would you hate to be Lady Julia Brooke?"

Such a soft, loving look stole over the face he was watching, that for an instant he almost fancied he had won, but she shook her head quietly, and a little sorrowfully, murmuring in a low tone—

"I am never likely to be Julia Brooke. Let us talk about something else."

"Not till I have had my answer," said he impatiently, for his temper was beginning to fail him, and it was no time now for misapprehension or mistake. "I have your father's sanction and your mother's consent. I have a right to ask you point-blank to be my wife. Oh, Lady Julia, I do love you! It is wrong to trifle with my feelings any longer."

He tried to put his arm round her once more, but again

she took up her distance so skilfully that he was foiled. It seemed strange she should be so much the cooler and more composed of the two; but then, besides that her heart was completely untouched, she would not have married *him*, of all people, for any consideration in the world.

"Papa and mamma are very accommodating," said she, with a little malicious curtsey. "Don't you think I am the person whose taste has to be consulted first?"

"And your taste is for something nobler, and richer, and altogether a better match than the poor devil of a younger brother," he answered rather ungenerously; adding, in a cold, haughty tone, "I ought to have known, I suppose, that it was unpardonable presumption to fancy a Brooke could be a match for Lady Julia Treadwell. I accept my dismissal, and will never trouble you to speak to me again."

"Now don't be an ass, Walter!" said she, coming closer to him, and taking both his hands, while she looked up in his face with a frank, kindly smile. "What's the good of talking such utter bosh? You're not a bad boy when you are reasonable. We have always been the best of friends, and always shall be. I would no more quarrel with you than with my brother. But you know as well as I do, Walter, that it's stuff to talk about anything in the shape of—of real love" (she got out with a blush) "between you and me. Don't be angry; we've had our breeze; shake hands and think no more about it."

He tried to put a heart-broken expression into his face, but somehow failed. He was angry, no doubt—disappointed, humiliated, provoked; yet there was something ludicrous in his position, even to himself. He raised his eyes to hers, they looked at each other for about ten seconds, and then both burst out laughing.

"I *knew* you were a good fellow, Walter," said her ladyship, with a cordial squeeze of both her pretty hands, "and I'm not deceived in you. We shall always be fast friends; and if ever I can do you a good turn I will, as sure as my name's Julia. You had better go now. I'll let you out of the conservatory, and you can get round to the stables without passing through the house. Leave me to settle with mamma. I'll let you down easy enough, you may be sure. I hav'n't half thanked you for the compliment. It is a compliment, I suppose? But you won't mind about that. I'll show my gratitude some day, never fear. In the meantime, God bless you, Walter, and good-bye."

She seemed still to be speaking, at least her voice was yet

ringing in his ears, while he threaded the shrubbery and found his way to the stables. There he swung himself into the saddle, and started for home at the most liberal pace his fast and well-bred charger could command.

Walter was not yet accustomed to defeat or disappointment, particularly in such affairs as that which had brought him to Tollesdale. It was very unusual for him to fail with the opposite sex, and this was his first appearance in the character of a discarded suitor. It seemed so strange to come away without a trophy of any kind—a flower, a glove, a trinket, not even the mark left by a glossy fragrant head upon the collar of his coat. He could scarcely realise the fact that he, Walter Brooke, of the Dancing Hussars, had been refused!

It is wonderful how a man in difficulties retires, as it were, upon one point after another, considering each in its turn the impregnable citadel he can never be forced to abandon. Wonderful how the gambler trusts ever to the next card dealt, the next main thrown, for recovery of his hopes and dawn of eventual success. Walter pinned his faith on Benedict now; and although it was doubtless unpleasant, nay, humiliating, to be foiled, particularly after obtaining both parents' consent, there was a certain gleam of consolation through the gloom in the reflection, that if the horse he had backed so heavily did pull it off, he was better without a wife after all.

"Fellows seem to get tired of matrimony," thought Walter, scouring down a grassy avenue that opened on the Middlesworth road. "I've heard lots of married men swear that it can never pay. And then the settlements, and the *trousseaux*, and the trotting-out to be crabbed by the collaterals, and the dreadful family dinners that have to be solemnised before the event. Upon my soul, I think I am well out of it! Oh, Benedict! Benedict! I know you have the pace, and I know they will run you straight. If you can but stay, notwithstanding all my ups and downs, I might pull through at last!"

Then, like the stab of a knife, came the recollection of the two bills, and catching the poor charger fiercely by the head, he urged him faster and faster, to the extremity of his speed.

Lord Waywarden, walking uneasily about amongst the white-faced bullocks, espied his young friend riding thus recklessly away. He was at no loss to infer failure in the suitor's errand, but attributed his defeat to a wrong cause.

"He's had a rough time of it with my lady," said Waywarden to his Herefords. "A very rough time of it, I'll be bound. Poor lad! he's never seen my lady with her back up.

I shouldn't wonder if she astonished him a good deal. Now if Ju fancies this light dragoon—and I don't see why she shouldn't, for he's about the right pattern—there's a nice piece of work cut out for me! Dear, dear, it's hard to have got old and heavy, and bald and slow, only to be bothered with women's likes and dislikes to the end of the chapter. Perhaps I'd better go at once and have it out with my lady. Then we'll see what can be done for Ju."

It is needless to add that, notwithstanding the loss of an afternoon's farming, his lordship was much relieved when he got home and discovered the real state of the case.

CHAPTER XXI

AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S CASTLE

AMONGST the many promises offered by the future, there is none to which people look forward with so much pleasure as to that condition they are pleased to term independence. With men the idea of this abnormal state is comprised either in the tenancy of a public-house, or the occupation and tillage of land, according to the means of the visionary independent; while with women the letting of lodgings alone would seem to satisfy a craving for self-government utterly opposed to the very conditions and peculiarities of their sex. Each of these pursuits appears to me especially influenced by circumstances beyond individual control; but perhaps the last is, of all others, that which, necessitating considerable pliability of character, and implicit obedience to the whims of one's fellow-creatures, is therefore farthest of all removed from the impossible state of independence desired.

Miss Prince, showing fussy bachelors and suspicious matrons over a house near the Strand, of which she had recently purchased the lease and fixtures for a term of years, sometimes wished herself back again at Tollesdale, subject only to the caprices of Lady Waywarden, rather than the imperious summons of taxes, gas, and water-rates, the weekly imposition of tradesmen, the daily vexations of servants, and the hourly demands on time and patience exacted by the first and second floor. It was, to use her own words, "up early and down late now, and everything to see to with one's own eyes, and all the work of three storeys to be got through by one pair of hands. As to servants! bless you, my dear, servants are worse than useless in a place like this; for

cooking means waste; and cleaning-up, drunkenness; and even dusting is but another word for breaking everything within reach, right and left!"

In such a strain did Miss Prince then ease her mind, two or three times in an afternoon, while discussing the many drawbacks incidental to housekeeping with her dear friend, Mrs. George Stoney, that lady having brought herself and her whole family, present and prospective, to lodge with her old schoolmistress. It is only fair to say, however, that the little woman was in her heart as happy and as full of chirp as a canary in its cage. The sweetest bread is the hardest earned; the soundest sleep, that which is wrested from toil; and then what matter vexation, cares, annoyances, when we have got our real treasures about us? Miss Prince never wished herself back at Tollesdale for more than a minute at a time.

In the front attic was stowed away the poor paralytic sister, so serene, so contented, so happy! blessing God that her disease had but little affected the mind, and could not paralyse the soul. The back attic was a lumber-room, rich in accumulations of dust and litter, offering to orderly dispositions like Miss Prince's a hideous and revolting sight. In the bedrooms were lodged with great compressible skill, Mrs. George Stoney, her husband, and family; Jane, who had followed their fortunes, sleeping out, as it is called, much against the advice and opinion of Dot. The drawing-rooms were occupied by a Scotch surgeon of no inconsiderable practice—an obliging but extremely troublesome lodger, as Miss Prince discovered when she had taken him in a week; eccentric in habits, irregular in hours, not averse to tobacco, and with a strong inclination for chemistry. Of late, indeed, he rented the back parlour, and had turned the small and gloomy apartment into a laboratory. Philip Stoney occupied the corresponding room in front; and where Miss Prince herself slept, and performed her toilet, remains to this day a mystery. Nevertheless, the little woman was always as precise in dress and prim in demeanour as if she still expected to meet Lord Waywarden at every turn. Time and absence had, moreover, in no way diminished her admiration for the character of that nobleman. A print from his portrait by Grant, on his favourite cob Ploughboy, hung in the parlour, and views of Tollesdale, from different points and at various elevations, adorned the drawing-rooms both back and front.

Miss Prince's gigantic heart was as adhesive as an oyster. From its great size, too, and the small circle of her acquaintance, she had plenty of room in it to accommodate them all.

It had taken in the whole family of the Stoneys ; and, indeed, the greatest blessing to that little community, after all their reverses, was that they might be together. The ostensible object of their residence in London being that George as well as his brother Philip should obtain some mercantile employment, for which he was well qualified by habit and education. He had been, however, so shaken in health by his reverses, that both wife and brother persuaded him, though with difficulty, to rest a while from all bodily and mental labour. To this end Philip brought every shilling of his own small earnings to the common stock ; and these driblets, with the modest portion of Mrs. Stoney, settled on herself, kept the family from the pressure of actual want. That lady came out with considerable energy under such trying circumstances. If her polysyllables were more frequent, and her manners more stately, than in prosperous days, the long words did not embarrass her activity, nor the queenly airs diminish aught of the diligence with which she bared her comely arms to roll a pancake, and to beat up a pudding. "Woman's proper sphere is her home," Mrs. George would observe with great dignity several times in the day ; "and no duties connected with that home, be it cottage, or be it castle (Dot, run and fetch me the dishcloth), can be too high for the meanest, or too low for the noblest of her sex ! A genteel female, Miss Prince, as well you know, is a genteel female still, sitting at the head of her own table, or down on her knees blacking her own grates."

Such sentiments, so entirely in accordance with her present feelings, and, as she fondly believed, the result of early tuition, sank gratefully on Miss Prince's ears. She had let the second floor to her old friends, at a rent calculated to meet their resources, rather than to pay the interest on her own capital ; and this arrangement was effected, moreover, with the most scrupulous consideration for their feelings ; but the good little landlady never grudged her liberality for an instant. My own belief is that both the women were exceedingly happy under their privations. They worked hard ; they bargained hard ; they lived hard ; they agreed in thinking their maid-of-all-work the least efficient domestic of her kind. "An idle, saucy thing ! with no more head than a pin !" was the form in which they worded their condemnation. They also esteemed a cup of tea, when the afternoon's work was accomplished, as the primary condition of health, and chief luxury of life. That refreshment they imbibed together out of a little brown teapot in Philip's apartment, before he came home from business, and would please themselves over their

refection by looking back to days of former splendour, far brighter than reality, as seen through the glowing medium of contrast and time.

To hear their talk you would have supposed them reduced peeresses at least—Lady Bountifuls in the country, Lady Patronesses in town, Lady Absolutes everywhere—bearing exile, privation, misfortune, with the courage and constancy of noble blood. After all, it amused them, and did nobody any harm.

George Stoney, too, seemed better in health since he had come to London. In Middlesworth everything reminded him too forcibly of his misfortune and the station from which he had fallen; but in the capital, where nobody knew him, and he knew nobody, he relapsed with tolerable contentment into a mere unit of the throng. It seemed, too, that in London ruin was nothing unusual, nor was there any rarity in either making or losing a fortune. "A thousand openings," as Mrs. George said, "continually offer themselves in the City"; and so long as none of these were examined too closely, the way to wealth appeared delightfully easy and secure. George read the papers, took his early walk, lounged and rested, with the idea that he was merely looking about him to choose with caution the most eligible among all the very eligible modes in which a man of business habits and practical experience could employ his talents. In the meantime his health improved, and his fits of despondency became less distressing. His was one of the many dispositions, over-sensitive, and deficient in self-reliance, that can bear sorrow better than anxiety, to which the prospect of misfortune is far more terrible than misfortune itself. He was very happy, too, in the constant society of wife and children, especially Dot; and that young lady, delighting, as became her age and sex, in anything like change, flitted about him, and petted and worried him to his heart's content, when she was not occupied on the staircase with a newer, and therefore more important conquest.

I am concerned to state that, in the present phase of domestic affairs, and under the relaxed surveillance of Jane, a shocking flirtation had sprung up between Dot and the lodger of scientific tastes—a tall, uncouth personage, with red hair, freckled skin, and an inordinate fondness for children. This good-humoured ogre had served Her Majesty in no less distinguished a regiment than the Dancing Hussars, where his quaint manners and thorough-going honesty made him a favourite with the men in the hospital, as with the

officers at the mess-table. Being a military surgeon, it is needless to observe that his tastes were both scientific and domestic, cherished all the more fondly that the conditions of his profession were especially antagonistic to study and repose. I am bound to admit, however, that his opinion of the healing art was somewhat derogatory, especially as regarded the skill required in its higher branches.

"A surgeon," he would say, in the broad Scotch accent that fifteen years' quizzing had been unable to modify—"a surgeon's just a wright, mon, or a joiner like. He can mend, but he canna mak'. He'll be none the worse o' gumption when the stretcher's laid. Wi' madicin', it's clean guess-work. I'll no' say but a docktor 'll be whiles right. It's mair by guid luck than guid guidance, tho'."

With such sentiments, it was strange that Mr. Blair, as he was called, should have had any practice at all; and ladies certainly would have placed but little confidence in so plain-dealing a professor. To say, "My dear madam, there's nothing the matter with you. If you were to get up and clean the house, you would be quite well!" ensures dismissal from attendance on a genteel invalid. Far better to prescribe excitement, tonic, change of scene, and good living; to forbid worry, opposition, agitation, or exposure to cold, and to lay all disorders of stomach, liver, lassitude, and discontent, upon sensitive fibres (whatever they may mean!), relaxation of nerves, and general want of tone in the whole system.

Mr. Blair, however, was a skilful operator, and the extraordinary strength of his long, bony, freckled fingers stood him in good stead where dexterous manipulation was required in wounds, fractures, or such other local injuries as he contemptuously designated "just joiner's work!"

Dot, then, who had of late abandoned her favourite camel for a certain ill-used doll with a shock head of hair—which, although she lavished many beautiful epithets on it in private, was known in the family by the name of "Mumps"—during the rehearsal of some theatrical performance, hurled her Fetich from top to bottom of the staircase, narrowly missing the glass-lamp in the hall. Mumps pitched on her head, which broke short off at the neck, and Dot, though generally pitiless, was so moved by this unexpected decapitation that she forthwith began to cry. A door on the landing opened, a red head, with whiskers to match, protruded itself, and a long, freckled hand wandered over the curls and pinafore of the sobbing child, as gently as though she were some rare

specimen of moth or butterfly whose beauty would crumble beneath its touch. Dot looked up, a little frightened, through her tears, but presently reassured by the kindly glance of the grey eyes with their white lashes, pointed with mute eloquence to the doll's sad dismemberment, and wept afresh.

"Dinna greet, my bonnie bird! dinna greet!" said the tall Scotchman, examining the case with as much gravity as if Mumps had been a human subject. "Whisht, lassie, I'm saying! What for would ye mak' a blether for the like o' yon? See, now, I'm a joiner mysel'. Come away wi' *me*, an' I'll just tak' up the arteries, and tie the ligaments, and sort your wee bairnie for ye's good as new!"

Dot, in the keen perception of childhood, recognised that true sympathy which begins with assistance. She clasped the bony finger confidently in her own little fist, and looked up to the Scotchman's face.

"Will it be Mumps, the same as before she was broke?" said the child, with vague misgivings that such a resurrection was too delightful to be real.

"Mumps, sure enough," replied her new friend, ushering the little lady with great delight into his own apartments. "Hey, lassie! There's a piece till ye. Sit *you* down, my woman, till I fit the auld head on the auld shouthers. Look, see what a canny bairn you've gotten noo that its minnie's done greetin'!"

So Dot, accommodated with a slice of bread and marmalade, watched her host's operations with the greatest curiosity and delight, dangling her legs from his great arm-chair, smearing its leather cover, as well as her own face, with marmalade, and making herself in all respects completely at home.

After this introduction the pair were inseparable. When the surgeon came back from his practice, Dot, hearing his step in the hall, never failed to fly downstairs for a romp with her friend—a romp so vigorous and of such duration as to incur Jane's grave displeasure when her charge returned hot, tumbled, dishevelled, breaking at intervals into unseemly mirth, and agitated by the hiccoughs, too surely consequent on over indulgence in that agreeable emotion.

She had wonderful stories also to tell the family concerning her new admirer. Miraculous descriptions of his magic powers; his conjuring accomplishments; the instruments laid out on his shelves; and something, almost as big as Mumps, that he kept in a jar. She had even excited the curiosity of her father concerning this remarkable North-

countryman, long before Mr. Blair, who was shy, modest, and retiring, though he *had* worn a hussar uniform, could bring himself to sustain an interview with any of his fellow-lodgers. Through the good offices of Miss Prince, however, an introduction was at length effected, and it was with no little pride that Dot, in a clean frock and hands for the occasion, conducted her own particular friend upstairs, and herself ushered him into the presence of her family on the second floor.

Philip, coming home from business, that evening was formally repudiated by the fickle young lady, who announced her approaching nuptials with "Good Blair," as she called him, in a tone of becoming solemnity. He could not but laugh at the gravity with which Dot administered consolation for his disappointment, assuring him that on her wedding trip, to "the place where the beasts are, like my Noah's Ark, if he would promise not to cry he should go there too."

He seldom laughed now. Philip had need of all his courage, and all his determination, to keep up his spirits in the routine of daily drudgery to which he seemed hopelessly tied for any length of time to come. There was labour required, clear-headedness, honesty, unremitting attention—all the qualities that go to money-making, without the lure of prospective wealth. He felt he was but the horse in the mill, working round the weary circle only to secure his daily feed; with speed to win a plate, and mettle to cross a country, yet hampered to the plodding, monotonous task that an ass, had it but the weight, could do as well. Philip did not complain — nay, he never even suffered himself to repine. Partly in the gladsome days that seemed so far off now, partly under the pressure of adversity and grievous disappointment, he had learnt the great lesson of life. He knew that it was well for man not to have the selection of his own lot. He believed that there might be good reasons for many things that were utterly beyond his own comprehension. He felt that three-score years and ten was but a miserable segment of the perfect circle that comprised existence. He had trained himself to think, as a soldier who takes his turn of guard-mounting or fatigue, the review before royalty, or the bivouac under fire, equably and indifferently, because they constitute alike the general principle which he calls duty. As a traveller, to whom it is of little import that the way should be here smoother, there rougher, now in the scorching sun, then in the pelting shower; because it is but a day's

work after all, and home is so near at hand. He could think of Helen, and the dream that had never quite seemed a possibility, without bitterness, almost without regret. It was something to know of what his nature *was* capable, had circumstances been different. He could even trust himself to dwell on the pale, stately beauty that constituted his ideal of womanhood, and feared not to recall looks and tones and kind words spoken, because, as he insisted to himself, Miss Brooke was only a memory now. A memory indeed! I should like to hear some casuist define the difference between a memory and a reality. Substance and shadow can never be very far apart. Philip's hopeless attachment, like all others so called, had a considerable leaven of indefinite hope at its very core.

To be sure, he didn't know everything, and it was lucky for him that he did not.

Going constantly to business, through the most crowded thoroughfares of London, this young man could not of course take note of the countenance or figure of every passenger he shouldered on the pavement. It is easy enough to pass a familiar friend without recognition in the City. Thus it happened that Philip Stoney was unaware of the impression made by his presence on a shabbily dressed and altogether disreputable looking vagabond who slank along behind him one sunshiny morning for a considerable distance, avoiding as much as possible the observation of No. 76, on duty in the Strand. This person had shrunk from meeting Philip's eye when he came face to face with him, starting, indeed, and changing countenance with considerable embarrassment, but turning round directly the latter had passed, and following on his track, now almost overtaking him, and again lingering in the rear, as if wishing, yet fearing to be recognised. Such was indeed the case. Though Philip's face brought back to him all of his life that he had the smallest pleasure in recalling; though Stoney Brothers, and especially the younger, were the only people, save one, for whom he had the slightest feeling of gratitude or affection, he dared not go up to the man he considered his benefactor, and accost him as a friend. Jem Batters had escaped from the burning of the brewery with life, which he sometimes thought was more than he deserved. The fire had originated in his own habits of drunkenness, for when left in charge of the building he had neglected the very duty he was especially placed there to fulfil, had sunk into the sodden, stupid sleep of intoxication, only waking to find

himself bewildered, and not half sobered, amongst the flames. Maddened by surprise and terror, he had rushed into the street and fled to the open country for his life. He never stopped nor recovered his senses till the glare on the horizon half a dozen miles off denoted that he was at least clear of immediate danger, and then mingled feelings of shame, remorse, and apprehension that he might be suspected as an incendiary, prevented his returning to his home, and made him leave Middlesworth and its neighbourhood, as he phrased it, "for good and all."

A man so circumstanced almost always goes to London. Jem Batters turned up in the metropolis with no better recommendation than his own unprepossessing appearance, and it is needless to say that anything like an honest career was closed to him from the first. A garret in a low neighbourhood became his home; occasional—using the term, in contradistinction to professional—thieves were his associates; and dog-dealing, which comprised also dog-stealing, supplied him with the means of procuring a little food and a good deal of gin and beer.

Nevertheless, demoralised, brutalised as he was, the man could not see Philip without experiencing a revulsion of feeling that prompted him to take his benefactor by the hand, entreat forgiveness, and implore help into the path of honesty once more. The very look of Philip's back and a certain shooting-coat he remembered well, was like a puff of the free Bridlemere breezes that used to cool his forehead so gratefully far away down there in the fresh smiling country at home. He could fancy he saw the white cottage with its heavy thatch, and its low, snug porch, the little garden, the pigsty, the row of pea-sticks, the linen on the thorn fence, and his mother watching for him in the lane, shading her eyes with her hand. He was going to his work once more in the dull, grey mornings, with spade on shoulder and pipe in mouth, young, strong, healthy, above all, honest, and afraid of no man. He wondered now that he could ever have been discontented with his lot. Ay, if he had but minded what mother told him, he would not have been to-day skulking about the close, narrow streets of London, so far from his parish, so far from home, so far from her. The last thought goaded him to overtake Mr. Stoney, and ask if the "old woman," as he would have called her, were still alive; but his heart failed him when he thought of the young man's clear eyes and bold manly face. "Dash it!" said he, "a chap's good for nothing till he's had his drain," and so speaking,

turned aside into one of the many gin-shops abounding in that part of London.

It was full, even in the morning. Two or three men, who looked as if they had been up all night, and indeed every night for a week, thronged the door; a woman leading a child was coming out, another carrying a baby going in. A short, white-faced, broad-shouldered man, in a fur cap and dirty shirt sleeves, was serving half a dozen customers as fast as they slapped their halfpence down on the counter; but nobody seemed to dwell over the pernicious luxury, nor to connect with its consumption any idea of conviviality or good-fellowship. It was served, as it seemed, grudgingly; tossed off greedily; and, if one might judge by the craving expression of the wistful eyes, forgotten as soon as drank. Jem groped in his pocket for the coppers required, turned his dram off at one go-down, felt its fiery influence give temporary warmth to his heart and steadiness to his nerves, wiped his lips, ran out into the street again, and found of course that Philip had disappeared amongst the crowd, and was gone.

He must return home now—home, as usual, at this time of the day; but the sight of his old employer had unsettled him, and Jem Batters began at last to take serious thought of the position he had voluntarily accepted, and the probable termination of his career. Even the gin so lately swallowed did not afford him the usual anodyne. As he dragged himself heavily up the filthy wooden staircase that led to his den—for it could hardly be called a room—something of that sad home-sickness took possession of him which afflicts the mountaineer when he has been absent from his native hills beyond a certain time. The countryman felt he was pining—actually *pining* for his heavy shoes, his smock-frock, his spade, his pickaxe, his old familiar tools. He longed for the very snort of the plough-horses, the tinkle of the bell-wether, the muck and mire of the farmyard. His vigour sapped by the polluted atmosphere in which he lived, his nerves shattered by alcohol and tobacco, I believe that if he had heard a cow low in the street he must have burst into tears.

"Come," said Jem, sitting down on the dirty floor, and looking wildly about him, "this won't do—this won't. I ain't a-goin' to have the horrors, surely—not this turn. Dash it! if I'd ere a copper left, I'd get out of this, and go for a three."

The price, however, of that stimulant, namely, a threepenny measure of gin, not being available, he was compelled to

satisfy himself for the present with a smoke; so he filled a pipe with strong, acrid tobacco, and propping his back against the wall, because chair and bedstead had long ago found their way to the pawnbrokers, proceeded, with considerable dissatisfaction, to survey his present home.

I can scarcely hope to convey to any but a clerical reader, or one whose kindly sympathies have led him to visit the dwellings of the London poor, even a vague idea of the lair for which Jem Batters had exchanged his cottage in the green lane at Bridlemere. So true is it that half the world does not know how the other half lives. Our great metropolis contains the richest and poorest inhabitants on earth. It would be very good for both to see something more of each other. A man goes to his turtle at eight with none the less appetite that he has supplied a starving family with bread at noon. A woman's beauty loses none of its freshness for opera, ball, and concert, that she has sat by the sick, read the Bible to the blind, or stretched a gentle hand to raise the fallen, before she made her toilet for the world. It is something to be associated, however humbly, with One who is especially the Friend of the friendless; and those who seek, like the Persian King, for a new pleasure, should not despair of finding it till they have tried the recreation of doing good. I am not going to enter upon the question of how far people are justified in spending money on articles of luxury and ostentation: such a subject would involve much splitting of straws in its discussion, and trespasses, moreover, on the domain of political economy. If the rich had fewer follies, the poor, at least temporarily, would have less employment. Pending the discovery of Utopia, we must accept our own world as we find it; still nobody need be the least afraid but that opportunities will arise in plenty every day for the exercise of Christian charity, and the indulgence of their best and holiest feelings, without apprehension lest alms-giving should interfere with the rights of labour, or the impostor's mouth be filled with the bread of an honest man.

The room, then, which, out of doors, Jem Batters designated by the imposing title of "his place," was low, gloomy, and ill-ventilated. The walls were blotched and stained with damp, the floor with filth. A close atmosphere, reeking with a variety of unsavoury odours, seemed to have been imprisoned here for weeks, unfreshened even by such air as was to be had without. Jem, in his early cottage life, had long ago been taught to associate rheumatism with open windows, and cold with cleanliness. Nor was the small

allowance of oxygen supplied consumed by the proprietor alone: several animals of different kinds occupied the apartment in common with its lord. They were chiefly of such descriptions as are called by men of Jem's class "fancy articles." A lop-eared rabbit squatted, grave and unwieldy, in a dilapidated hutch. Two ferrets wound their white bodies stealthily, like huge caterpillars, to their master's person, and crawled into his pocket. Rats of grim and venerable exterior, clustered in a wooden tenement, gnawed and splintered by their teeth. A squirrel was practising perpetual motion in its cage. The curiously British instinct that impels our countrymen to the pursuit of what they call sport—for which there is no corresponding term in any foreign language—was deeply ingrained in Jem's character, as in that of nine out of ten Britons throughout every class of society. This peculiar organisation it is which leads my lord to breed a Derby winner; to cross the North Sea in his yacht that he may whip wild streams amongst the pines for Norwegian salmon; to scratch his lordly face, and imperil his noble neck over Northamptonshire ox-fences in the first flight with a pack of foxhounds; which sends the colonel after the buffalo on the prairie, or wild hog in the Deccan, or the cruel tiger in the jungles of the Punjaub; which bids our squires slay partridges, our yeomen keep greyhounds, our village blacksmith set surreptitious trimmers in the forbidden mere; which makes our mechanics dog-fighters, and our peasants poachers: nay, which tempts the cosy London tradesman to sit patiently in a punt for hours, that he may take a prey from the bosom of the quiet Thames, spread like a sheet of silver under lovely Richmond Hill.

Jem Batters possessed this instinct to a considerable degree, and it induced him to appropriate other people's dogs in London, as it had tempted him to snare the squire's game at Bridlemere. He drew some incomprehensible distinction in his own mind between such pursuits and the actual purloining of money and silver spoons. I doubt if Jem considered himself virtually a thief, although he made a precarious living by stealing favourites from doating masters and mistresses, chiefly the latter, whose gratitude bestowed, as their affecting advertisements promised, large rewards on restitution of the missing treasure. He was often heard to boast that he did a good business in this, which he was pleased to term the fancy and toy-dog line.

To-day, however, he looked about him remorseful, and disgusted with himself. The sight, as I have said, of Philip

Stoney's back had worked a complete revulsion of feeling in this poor, friendless vagabond. Business, of course, must be attended to in the meantime; but still he resolved, come what might, if he watched at the same place every day for a week, he would have another look at the only face in London that reminded him of his boyhood and his mother, and, bad as they were, the better and happier days of the old life at home.

CHAPTER XXII

A BROKEN REED

"I'LL lay against the field! *Bar one!*" "I'll lay against the field! *Bar one!*" Amongst the Babel of voices that rise from the seething turmoil of the ring on Middlesworth Racecourse, this sentence is the oftenest repeated, and the most distinct. While the speculators who live by the Turf, from the great commission agent, never opening his mouth but in hundreds, to the Welsher, offering the best price going in pounds, but missing, when confiding takers of the odds dream fondly they shall be paid, are jostling, elbowing, crushing, and, so to speak, *eating* one another; above the roar, and the swarm, and the confusion, still the noisy exception predominates—"*Bar one!*"

That "one" is Benedict, the pick of the prophets, the pride of the stable, the good thing of the forthcoming year.

See! the numbers are up. What a field of horses! Three-and-twenty going for the great event! and from close-packed carriages, from densely crowded stand—from dark, serried masses lining the course in long perspective, far away, even to the outskirts of the town, thousands of upturned faces are watching eagerly for the favourite; thousands of voices asking in every tone, from shout of careless glee to whisper of hoarse emotion, "Which is Benedict?"

Here he comes! Striding down the straight, like a steam-engine, hard held, going within himself—strong, easy, level, regular as clockwork; his skin satin, his muscles steel, his crest iron. There is even a grim smile on Sam Waster's pale face, as he steadies him deftly to his hand, feet slightly forward, elbows in, the silken jacket inflated, fluttering, and the dirt flying behind him in the faces of his competitors. Sam has taken off nine pounds of weight to ride this very race. He is on at five hundred to nothing; and if judgment, science, and horsemanship can land him, Sam means to be first past the chair. There is no question about the horse running straight to-day!

Wedged in a corner of the stand, whence he could command the whole of the racecourse with his glasses, but, contrary to his custom, neither making the agreeable to the smartest of the ladies nor conversing with the most influential of the men, Walter Brooke stood watching the favourite, paler, sterner, more reserved than his wont. He had shut his book up, left the ring, and ascended to this post of observation, that he might look on undisturbed, and abide the issue.

While the horses walked off towards the starting-post, a white-gloved hand was laid on his shoulder, and Multiple's pink face and black whiskers were at his ear. To do him justice, the money-lender had taken the trouble of penetrating the crowd to reach his friend, that he might give him a hint.

"They're making Bivouac a favourite down there," said he, nodding towards the betting enclosure, with his cunning smile. "I wish there mayn't be a screw loose with our horse. I've laid a good deal of my money off since I came."

"Bivouac can't get near him at the weights," answered Walter, turning still paler than before. "I shall stand every shilling!"

To-day must make or mar him; he knew that; besides, it was too late now for compunction or compromise. The flag was down, and they were off!

His hand shook so that he could hardly hold his glasses in their place. The distant race looked like the hues of a kaleidoscope, drawing rapidly out into a parti-coloured stripe. The man at Walter's elbow voted the pace merry; the one behind him thought it awful; and a crusty old gentleman of great experience and pertinacity observed, "That fool Sam is making too much use of the favourite." Nevertheless, Benedict, forcing the pace to suit himself, was two lengths ahead of everything, and full of running.

Walter's knees shook now, and his whole frame felt unstrung. Success is sometimes, for the moment, more difficult to bear than defeat.

It seemed a good job, after all, that Lady Julia had refused him.

As the horses came in sight, a roar like that of a famished monster rose from the whole multitude at once. Rushing straight to the spectators, it was difficult to tell who was in front. Already whips were going, and arms and legs urging horses to the loose, irregular stride that told their powers were spent. At the distance there were but three in the race, and one of these changed his leg and gave in fifty yards from home.

Bivouac, by Vidette, was game as a fighting-cock. To use his trainer's expression, "he could stay for a week"; but he was a length behind the favourite, and his jockey had already got at him severely.

Opposite the stand, Benedict made something like a false step, though it was scarce perceptible to anyone but his rider. Bivouac's nose was at Sam Waster's knee in the next stride.

None but the great jockey knew perhaps what had happened. He sat resolutely down for the famous set-to that had so often landed him a winner on the very post. His whip was out, his spurs were going, while every muscle of the wiry, pliant little athlete seemed to lend aim and power and energy to the effort of his horse.

Bivouac crept up, inch by inch. To either rider the other's horse seemed standing still; and the roaring crowd, the close-packed stand, the rails, the booths, the telegraph shed, to be fleeting by them at the rate of forty miles an hour.

Walter's heart beat so fast he felt half suffocated; and a chill sensation, beginning at the crown of his head, curdled all the blood in his body, till it reached his heels; the shouting, too, stupefied him as he heard the horses' names roared alternately by thousands of lungs, mingled with exclamations of "Capital race!" "What a rally!" "Look at Sam's set-to!" "By Jove! it's a dead heat!"

Walter shut his glasses and put them in their case. "Beautifully ridden," he muttered; "but we've had a squeak for it!" Then he swore one deep, deadly, bitter oath below his breath, and wiped the dried froth from the corners of his mouth, for Bivouac's number was up, and the favourite in the last stride had been beaten by a head!

As he went down the crowded staircase of the stand, he moved like a man in a dream. The Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil's party was before him; and Lady Goneril turned round to shake hands with the good-looking young hussar. He had presence of mind to seem pleased, and to observe "How cold it was! and what a capital race!" But I think if her ladyship had known the very slight impression made on his senses by her gorgeous attire of dark blue velvet trimmed with swansdown, she would have ascribed his indifference to the score of intense stupidity, and never been so civil to him again.

He didn't know he had seen her, when Multiple asked him the question later, as they drove home. The money-

lender, as usual, had not failed to make a pretty good day's work.

"I was always a little doubtful about that leg," said he, while driving Walter up the Bridlemere avenue in his phaeton, after the races; "and you see the deep ground broke Benedict down, just as I feared it might. If I hadn't got home on Bivouac, I should have been in the hole as well as you."

The other did not answer; he had spoken but little during their drive, and then only on matters unconnected with the day's sport. It was obvious that he was beat, both morally and physically. He had scarcely enough of the common instinct of courage left to dissemble his pain. Multiple read his thoughts, and smiled in covert triumph: with the sister's promise given, and the brother completely in his power, he felt the game was his own. He regretted only that he must go to London in an hour; that he could not even stay to dinner, and mark with cruel glee the constraint and misery of his affianced bride. Nevertheless, he had given Helen to understand that he should see her before he started, and he liked to think of her waiting his arrival, dressed for dinner thus early, that the enforced interview might be uninterrupted.

Miss Brooke looked very pale and sad, as she sat at the drawing-room window, to watch Frank Multiple and her brother drive up the avenue. Her heart, indeed, melted at the sight of Walter, and she knew she had never loved him so well as now, for was she not a woman?—and had she not sacrificed her happiness, her self-respect, nay, her very existence for his sake? It seemed harder than usual to bear her fate to-night, for the day had been one of much discomfort and complaint with the squire, nor had she been dismissed from attendance on him early enough to take her customary walk across the park, as far as a certain rising ground and clump of trees for which she had of late contracted a great affection. It might have been a little galling that this daily pilgrimage was prevented by her early toilet. Now that she was dressed, and it was too late for walking, a soft, spring rain had begun to fall, bringing out almost perceptibly the teeming buds of the hawthorn, and the young, green leaves on the topmost branches of the elms. A fragrant air stole in at the open window, mingling with the scent of a few fresh-gathered violets. Something in the time, the place, the scene, seemed so suggestive to the longing, loving heart, of all it had hoped, and lost, and suffered, that the large tears brimmed in Helen's eyelids, do what she would to keep them back, and fell slowly,

Beat.

one by one, upon her hands. There was a face that met her, whichever way she turned — a haunting face, with fond, reproachful eyes, that no power on earth could drive away. Not such a face as Multiple's, bright, confident, overbearing, assuming already, though his glance shunned hers, the port and demeanour of a master. Nor such a face as Walter's, haggard, contracted, desperate, prematurely wrinkled, as it seemed to her loving observation, since the morning, and wearing on its every feature the deep-set marks of anxiety and shame and remorse.

There was no need to tell her what had happened. She knew too well that her brother had lost heavily, and that now more than ever must she interpose to save him who was powerless to save himself. If she had cherished any vague, uncertain hope that his success might, in some way or other, help her to a chance of freedom, this conviction seemed to cut away the last strand of rope to which she clung.

Walter soon went upstairs to dress for dinner. Jack was already engaged in the same operation. Multiple's phaeton was waiting at the door to take him to the station, and there was no escape from one of those *tête-à-têtes* with her future lord which she loathed and dreaded every day more and more, none the less, as time slipped on, that she felt their engagement must be proclaimed, ratified, *kept!*

It required all her constancy, all her resignation, all her noble, self-sacrificing courage to realise this last contingency. It is not too much to say that she would have accepted as a blessing any misfortune to herself that might have interposed to save her from the fate she had elected to accept.

They were a "likely couple," as the upper-housemaid thought, peeping into the drawing-room to set it to rights a little during the dressing-hour, and retiring in great confusion when she found it thus occupied. She voted him a splendid gentleman, with his strong-built figure, his brilliant colour, his black whiskers, his profusion of velvet and jewellery. Miss Brooke, indeed, was too pale for her taste, and "very 'aughty for so young a lady" (the housemaid herself was of the rosy, roystering pattern); "but she'd a 'andsome 'ead, in course, and carried it, no doubt, like a queen!"

It was erect enough now, for Multiple was leaning over her workbox, and affecting, as he sometimes chose to do, the playful confidence of an accepted lover. Strange he could not see how pained and distressed she was! Perhaps he did see it, and liked to mark the struggles of the wild bird in his hand.

"Helen!" said he, dwelling a little on the word to watch her wince under that familiar appellation; "Helen, I am concerned about Walter. He has lost a large stake to-day, and I fear he has not the means to pay it up."

The dark eyes flashed defiance, and the blood mounted to her brow at the insinuation; but it ebbed slowly back, and her head sank dejectedly when she remembered the real dishonour of which this man held the proofs. She ought to be thankful for any influence over him, of whatever nature, that could save her brother.

"It is as I feared," she said very sadly. "I saw it in his face when he came in. Perhaps it may be a lesson to him. Is it very much? More than we could make up amongst us? —I mean, Jack and I?"

She was evidently resolved to exclude *him* from participation in family affairs as long as she could; but he would not so understand her.

"Don't distress yourself," said he, placing his hand on hers, which lay beneath his touch, cold and passive as the hand in alabaster on the paper-weight by its side. "I have pulled men through worse scrapes than his; and we are all in one boat now, are we not, Helen?—though it's still your fancy to keep it dark. Well, it's lucky for Walter that we are. Lucky for him that he has a sister, and is soon to have a brother-in-law! It would have been awkward, wouldn't it, if he'd fallen into any other hands than mine?"

Whenever he thought she was not sufficiently demonstrative in her submission, this was the generous manner in which he chose to twitch the rope round her neck. It never failed to succeed, as now.

"You are very good, Mr. Multiple—Frank, I mean," was her answer. "I am sure we are truly sensible of your kindness—truly grateful; and I, most of all!"

She spoke in a low, weary tone, as if forcing herself to say something she had got by rote. He was not quite satisfied yet.

"Of course—of course," he replied impatiently. "I have no doubt you know the alternative and appreciate my forbearance; and so you ought. But look you, Helen: I think I have a right to some consideration in this business, and you are hardly treating me on the square. At your earnest request I give you your own time; and, I must say, you have taken it to some purpose. If I am to assume the responsibilities of your family—and you alone know what serious responsibilities these are—I am surely entitled to be

considered one of them. I must be off in five minutes to hit the train. Don't you think, Helen, as you object to my doing so, you are bound to speak to your father yourself when I am gone?"

This was a twitch at the rope that brought its poor, spirit-broken captive down on bended knees with a vengeance.

"Not to-night," pleaded Helen. "Not to-night. He was so much worse to-day; and, you know, the doctors say that any agitation, however pleased he was, of course,—but that any agitation is so bad for him, and might bring on another fit. I promise not to delay an hour when he is better. There, I promise. Don't—don't worry me, please; I think I haven't been quite well all day."

She moved from the table at which they had been standing and bent over some hothouse flowers by the window. He asked her to give him one of these, in a tone that implied request less than command, and she obeyed at once, selecting the choicest blossoms, and tying them up in a neat, business-like manner to form a bouquet. The nimble fingers did not tremble, nor the pale forehead flush, nor was there any of the assumed reluctance, the pretended refusal, the playful expostulation, that renders a gift of this sort precious both to the giver and recipient.

He would let her off none of his dues. He made her pin the nosegay in his buttonhole, and while she stooped over it in the performance of this act of vassalage, both her brothers, ready dressed for dinner, entered the room.

Multiple, nothing daunted, slapped Walter on the shoulder, and nodded a familiar farewell to Jack, hurried across the hall, jumped into his phaeton and drove off. The brothers looked in each other's faces with a blank astonishment that was sufficiently ludicrous. Then Walter broke out in a harsh, sarcastic laugh.

"Bravo, Nell!" said he. "That's your game, is it? Well, of all people in the world you're the last I should have suspected would set her cap at Frank Multiple!"

It was too much. Notwithstanding his ill-humour, the accusation, spoken in a rough, brotherly tone, was not really meant to offend. But Helen's nerves had been overstrung all day; the last quarter of an hour had been spent under an ordeal, the pain of which could only be appreciated by a proud, sensitive, and loving nature like hers, doing violence no less to its most cherished prejudices than its holiest affections; and now, to hear the person for whose sake the sacrifice had been offered, the torture undergone, make a jest

of her oblation, and attribute the victim's self-devotion to mere coquetry or worse, it was too much, too much, and Helen fairly broke down beneath the trial.

She did not answer, nor even look at him. She only hid her face in her handkerchief and rushed upstairs without a word.

Presently the brothers went to dinner by themselves, for her maid came in with a message, conveying "Miss Brooke's love; and she was tired, had got a headache, and did not mean to come down again to-night."

It was neither a hearty nor a lively repast. Walter spoke but little; busied himself profoundly in the mixing of his fish-sauce; pushed his plate away after every course with a gesture of dissatisfaction, and drank sherry as if it was water. While the servants were in the room Jack abstained from offering any remark, eating in silence, and with little appetite; but when the last dish had been handed, the last napkin flourished, the door closed for the last time, he resolved on making one determined effort to break through the reserve that was gradually growing up between his younger brother and himself.

It was a mild, still evening; the windows were open, and the mellow globe of lamplight, shining on the flowers and fruit that covered the table, increased the darkness of the black gulf without. A soft rain fell continuously, and, pattering gently on the garden-walk, enhanced the silence that grew every minute more oppressive. It served Jack, however, with a means of breaking the spell.

"Mr. Multiple must have had a wet drive," said he, pushing the wine across to his brother, and trying to speak indifferently, though irritated at the mere mention of the man's name, even by himself. "I wonder he didn't go to town straight from Middlesworth! Somehow, that fellow is always hanging about here. I say, Walter, upon my soul, I sometimes think he tries to spoon our Nell!"

"Very likely," answered Walter, with a liberal gulp at the sherry. "Nelly might do worse. He's a rich chap, and not a bad fellow of his kind."

"He's not good enough for Nell!" replied Jack vehemently. "Not half good enough; and never would be, if he had the Bank of England in his pocket. He's not a gentleman, Walter, I'm sure of it. I doubt very much if he is even an honest man!"

His brother winced, and the blood mounted in his cheek.

"A gentleman!" he exclaimed. "What *is* a gentleman?

—a poor devil who is expected to wear kid gloves and a good coat, and to pay for them out of twopence halfpenny *per annum*. Thank your stars you're an eldest son, Jack! You can be a gentleman that way, and an honest man too—free, gratis, for nothing."

"I don't know that I have so much advantage over you, Walter," said Jack, a little sadly; "and I'm sure if I have I'll share it with you, old boy, to the very uttermost. You and I, and Nell, you know, must hang together, whatever happens. The last thing I can remember our mother saying was, 'When you're a big boy, Jack, love your little brother and sister.' My little brother's as big as myself now, and twice as knowing; but that's no reason we shouldn't be as good brothers to-day as we were when I pitched into Mauley Major for licking you with a cricket-stump in the Lower Shooting-fields."

He spoke with affected gaiety, but his voice trembled a little in real emotion, and found its way, assisted by the sherry, to Walter's wild, hardened heart.

"You were always a good fellow, Jack," said the latter kindly. "By Jove! how that beast Mauley went down at the end of the second round. You cross-countered him. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday. For the first twenty minutes that was the best fight I ever saw in my life. After all, it was a very jolly time at dear old Eton—happier, I often think, than one has ever had since."

Perhaps the speaker considered this memorable battle, in which, as on many other occasions, his brother suffered severely for his sake, a chief ingredient in the jolly time alluded to so fondly. Be that as it may, there is no question but that, to use the young gentleman's vernacular, it was "an out-and-out mill," won by sheer pluck and endurance on the part of Brooke, who was a year younger, an inch shorter, and half a stone lighter than his antagonist.

"We might all be very happy together now," proceeded Jack, a little dubiously, as though venturing on dangerous ground, "if we had no secrets from each other. Come, Walter," he added, in a louder, franker voice, pushing the decanters over to his brother once more; "it's no use you and me beating about the bush. Why should we? You've lost a cracker again to-day. Got into a devil of a mess, I shouldn't wonder. Well, it's not the first time. Tell us all about it. If I can't help you, I can advise; if I can't advise, at least I can see you through it."

"I believe I may trust you," answered the other, filling

his glass. "I'll tell you what it is, Jack. I *am* in a mess this time, and one that I don't see my way out of at all, just yet. You know, what with the regiment and my horses, and one thing and another, I've no end of expenses that it's quite impossible to meet with the governor's allowance—quite impossible!"

"Yes, I know that," said Jack, who had, indeed, sufficient reasons of his own for a conviction of the fact.

"Well, of course," resumed the other, with a certain vague dignity that he had often found impressive on similar occasions, "I can't live quietly down here, as you do; nor would I if I could. I must hold a certain position, and go to a certain extent in the world. This entails expense. Ready money must be got, by hook or by crook. Jack, I've been driven to the very utmost shifts—by Jove, sir, shifts I don't like mentioning even to you—for raising the wind, so as to keep me going during the last three months."

Jack turned pale: he dreaded what was to come next. Walter, too, had drank sherry enough to resolve he would make a clean breast of it once for all. He paused a moment, threw a biscuit to Tatters, dozing on the rug, and proceeded—

"Nothing but the heaviest pressure, Jack, would have induced me to be such a fool. You can have no idea what I endured before I could bring myself to—to compromise my own character so deeply. I had been floored at everything I touched. Such luck at whist would have broken Rothschild. I give you my word, I played three rubbers one night at Mexico's without holding a trump—and a partner most of the time who could only have played the game he did from inebriety, acting on confirmed softness of the brain. Then, you know, I lost three hundred slap in that cursed water-meadow with poor Fugleman. The horse was as good as a banknote. In short, altogether I was in such a mess that I went to a friend, and—I may as well out with it at once, Jack—I got him to back a bill for me at three months, for three hundred pounds."

Jack drew a long breath, immensely relieved. "Thank God!" said he, "it's nothing dishonourable! Walter, upon my word, you frightened me! I did not know what you were going to confess; and yet, I might have been sure of a Brooke," he added proudly, and with a gesture that gave him for the moment a certain resemblance to Helen. "I suppose none of *our* name ever yet did or thought a shady thing in their lives."

"Thank God"! said Jack,

"it's nothing dishonorable"!

The interruption recalled Walter to himself: his worse self—that is to say, cold, calculating, unfeeling, impervious to those softer and more generous emotions which had almost overmastered him for the moment ; with a readiness of resource and quick perception of expedients, habitual to him, the result, perhaps, not more of natural character than of the games of combined chance, skill, and calculation, to which his habits of life had trained him, he saw the possibility, even now, of using Jack's affection to extricate him from the most pressing of his difficulties. If one of these bills could be taken up and got back into his own hands, he need be less apprehensive that his fraud might be discovered, and, indeed, he would gain time to provide for the renewal, if not liquidation, of the other, which would be the only document likely to appear. He knew Jack well enough to be sure he would never dream of comparing notes with Rags, and, indeed, would consider the whole matter too sacred to breathe a syllable about it to any living soul—Jack was so safe, so loyal ; Jack was such an honourable fellow! When he thought of his brother's exclamation, he wondered how he could have been such a fool as ever to contemplate the avowal he was so near making a few minutes ago. It was folly to show your hand till the game was played out; and that culprit richly deserved sentence who pleaded guilty before his case had been tried.

Jack, in the meantime, was cogitating how he could get his brother out of his difficulties once again, and for the last time, without the possibility of their recurrence. He had done the same thing for Walter very often before, and, generous as he was, had usually contented himself with but vague promises of amendment. Now, he thought, if he could obtain some pledge for future self-government, no sacrifice would be too costly to attain so desirable an object. Jack had not the money in his own possession, of course ; indeed, our friend's available resources were seldom represented by paper, consisting generally of a few pieces of gold, and, towards quarter-day, even of silver. Nevertheless, he turned over in his own mind a thousand schemes for the furtherance of his plan, and determined at anyrate to start for London early the following morning, and see what could be done. The first step, of course, was to ascertain what had become of the bill. Now Walter, in his familiarity with such methods of raising the wind, had been careful to keep the two bills separate as far as he could. For the second he had obtained cash, short of very considerable discount, at which even his

accustomed stoicism complained loudly, from a person named Haman, of the Jewish persuasion; and more than the normal rapacity attributed by Christians to capitalists of that faith. From previous acquaintance with this gentleman's system of doing business, he thought it extremely probable that his bill had long ago found its way into other hands; whereas, in Pounder's office he had equal reason to suppose that its companion would be forthcoming, at all events until the period had expired for which it was drawn; so when Jack, after an interval of deep reflection, asked him abruptly "which of the money-lending tribe had got him by the throat," he answered in a tone of becoming meekness and penitence—

"Well, I went to the most respectable man I could find—a person of the name of Pounder; not exactly a Jew, you know, but a fellow who does these sort of things for noblemen, gentlemen, heirs to entailed estates—like you, Jack—and officers on full pay, like me. He's a most respectable man, or I wouldn't have had anything to do with him in such a matter, of course."

"I am glad to hear it," observed the elder brother, wondering what amount of roguery this conventional term "respectability" might be stretched to cover. "I should think the quality somewhat rare in his profession. What is the address of this respectable money-lender?"

"Pounder," answered the younger. "No Christian name, of course: these heathens never have. Mr. Pounder, No. 101 Short Street, Strand."

Jack repeated the address once or twice, so as to fix it in his mind, then he got up, walked round to his brother's chair, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Walter," said he, "I'll pull you through this. I can't quite see my way yet, but I'll pull you through. Don't let the thing bother you any more. I don't want to drive any bargain with you, old boy; you and I are much too good brothers for that; but, Walter dear, it would make me very happy, and Nelly too, if you would leave off betting so much, and playing so high, and resolve not to raise money in this way any more—at least, without consulting me. Only promise me this, if you can keep your promise, and you shall never hear the subject mentioned again!"

The tears came into Walter's eyes, and he dashed them away with his hand. Even *his* heart was not proof against such kindness, and once more he was on the eve of a full confession; but Jack, who had observed the gesture, and who could not bear to witness his distress, bade him "Cheer up;

there was nothing to be ashamed of. No great harm had been done, after all"; and the words fled back from his very lips. He dared not, he *could* not acknowledge himself a swindler in the face of this loving brother, this honest, generous, high-minded friend.

"I promise," said he, clasping Jack's strong hand in both his own. "You're too good to me. D—— it, old boy, I don't deserve such a brother. I'm tired now—tired and beat, and not half up to the mark. Good-night, Jack; we'll talk it over to-morrow, coolly and quietly, you know, without partiality, favour, or affection!"

So Walter, not entirely uninfluenced by his potations—for a man cannot drink a full-bodied brown sherry all dinner-time and for an hour or two at dessert, with the same impunity as second-growth claret at twenty-four shillings per dozen—took his candle and yawned his way upstairs, not entirely dissatisfied with the turn matters had taken, and impressed with a vague, misty kind of persuasion that Jack was a trump, and everything would turn out for the best in the end.

Tatters, coiled in the rug, jumped up full of life and energy directly his master stirred. The latter rang the bell, proceeded to his own room at the top of the house, threw himself into the worn arm-chair, with his eyes fixed on the French print, and loading the faithful short pipe, with Tatters (who had pattered upstairs close at his heels) curled on his knee, began to lay his plans and smoke.

Judging by the amount of tobacco consumed in their elaboration these must have involved considerable forethought. It was not till Jack had sat in the same position for more than two hours, during which the French print had completely lost its identity, and assumed a striking likeness to Lady Julia Treadwell, that he made the slightest movement, and then he started up, to the great discomfiture of his dog, and pulled a small, shabby portmanteau from under the bed.

No, Tatters! the gun-case is *not* forthcoming next, as on happier occasions, and it is no question now of a start in the early fogs of morning for the persecution of rabbits.

The terrier, with his head on one side, and a comical look of expostulation on his hairy visage, watched one article after another packed in the leathern receptacle, more and more dejectedly. Alas! they were all suggestive of decent in-doors attire. My own belief is, that when the dog saw a civilised morning-coat laid at the top, he made up his mind for the worst, and resolved what to do. At anyrate, he whined at

the door, as was his custom when asking to be let out, and although Jack left it ajar in case he should return, disappeared in the dark passage, and was seen no more that night.

Next morning, however, soon after dawn, Jack walked sturdily into Middlesworth station, with his portmanteau on his shoulder—for he made himself thus independent of carriages and servants, not choosing to be cross-questioned as to his journey—was somewhat provoked, somewhat amused, and a good deal surprised, to find Tatters waiting at the booking-office. There was no resisting the dog's appeal, though he looked a little sheepish, as if afraid he had done wrong, while imploring at the same time not to be left behind; and Jack, who was always rather childish about Tatters, but who had of late become fonder of him than ever, bade his faithful little follower jump on his knee, and carried him off with him to London.

While the inseparable couple, chilled, sleepy, and unbreakfasted, but consoled because together, were steaming away to the metropolis on his business, Walter lay snug and warm with closed curtains at Bridlemere, dreaming that he stood in a pew at Lady Julia Treadwell's side, to be called in church; but that hearing Bivouac was disqualified for the Great Middlesworth Handicap, and the stakes had been given to Benedict, Mrs. Major Shabracque stepped out from behind the organ, and forbade the banns.

CHAPTER XXIII

POUNCE COMMERCE

JACK BROOKE, arriving in London, dropped his portmanteau at the station, and sallied forth on business, after a heavy breakfast, with Tatters at his heels. The dog was well accustomed to be left to his own guidance, and it is indeed only by thus trusting dumb animals that they acquire the sagacity at which, in our self-conceit, we marvel so condescendingly. The brute's intellect, like that of the man, increases largely by exercise, and the assumption of responsibility is equally conducive to the moral improvement of each. A dog in a string is a contemptible instance, arguing want of confidence on one side, and of loyalty on the other, that deserves to terminate in secession; whereas the franker nature that leaves its four-footed dependant to roam at will, and trusts to its attachment for a reunion, finds itself tracked through crowded streets and intricate paths, with the unerring fidelity of an instinct both above and below the reasoning faculties of man.

Tatters, following him through the confusion of Middlesworth on market-day, was as little likely to lose his own master as his own skin, and, indeed, could have been deprived of either only by being forcibly caught up and held. Now this was no easy matter to accomplish. The dog, unless he was quite sure of his man, had a way of keeping out of arm's length, and dodging off from beneath the grasp, extremely baffling to a stranger; and if foiled, moreover, would have been no very desirable prize when captured. The black roof of his mouth, so much admired by Lady Julia, set off the whiteness of two formidable rows of teeth; and Tatters, who would have scorned to turn tail on pole-cat, fox, or badger, was capable of inflicting very severe punishment on the human hand, nor would he have had the slightest scruple in tearing it to the best of his ability.

Jack entertained, therefore, no apprehension of losing his dog in London, and stalked along in perfect confidence that

his friend would not leave his heels, Tatters plodding close behind him, ludicrously intent on the business he was about, and suffering himself to be in no way distracted by the remarks his rough-and-ready appearance called forth. These were more sincere than complimentary. The London passenger is seldom a good judge of terriers, and limits his profoundest criticisms to the paradox that their beauty consists in their ugliness, so that the long coat, long body, long head, and short legs of Jack Brooke's favourite elicited more derision than applause. A *connoisseur* in the article, however, had scanned him approvingly from the other side of the street, so approvingly, indeed, as to resolve on cementing a further acquaintance with this desirable specimen. For that purpose he lounged along about ten paces off, feigning to be wholly engrossed in omnibuses, shop-windows, chimney-pots, and such objects as seemed to have no possible connection with a prize twelve inches high.

Jem Batters, still in ankle-jacks and shabby velveteen, with the red handkerchief, much frayed and worn, knotted round his neck as of old, was patrolling the Strand, at the spot where he had once caught sight of Philip Stoney, in the vague hope of meeting that familiar face again. It had haunted Jem perseveringly of late, and the desire to learn news of home had acquired an irresistible force, which he accepted, in his ignorance, as a warning of some dreadful calamity to his mother or himself. Therefore he watched and waited day after day, at the same hour and place, missing Philip, whose time of attendance at his office varied according to the press of work, by about ten minutes, with the regularity of clock-work.

Such anxieties, however, could not be allowed to interfere with business. Jem noticed a "tidy sort of a dog" following a gentleman, and it was Jem's profession, therefore, to follow the dog. He had never seen Jack Brooke in a broadcloth coat and a London hat in his life, so did not recognise the young squire's back, nor, if he had, would it have made any difference to his proceedings. The dog he had convinced himself was a noble animal, provided by nature to be matched, mutilated, enticed, advertised for, and restored, according to his courage, breed, beauty, and the value set upon him by the proprietor. So Tatters followed Jack, and Jem followed Tatters, till they turned into Short Street, and stopped at Mr. Pounder's door.

Now, on one side of the house in which the money-lenders were the sole inhabitants, stood the dwelling of Miss Prince,

full to the very attics; and on the other an empty stationer's shop under repair, having a warehouse at the back, once a receptacle for unsold books, magazines, travels, biographies, novels like yours and mine, pamphlets on political questions of fleeting interest, and such literary lumber. This edifice, jutting out at right angles from the rear of the premises, commanded the rooms on the ground-floor of the neighbouring houses on each side. It was the very place from which Pounder's backyard could be reached most readily; and Jem's experience taught him that it was quite probable his hairy quarry would be turned into that backyard for a space, whether his master was returning home, or only paying a visit to a friend. Everything favoured his plan: the workmen had "knocked off," as they called it, for half an hour to a neighbouring beer-shop, leaving nothing to keep guard but a hundred of bricks, a riddling sieve with the bottom out, and a barrow full of lime. To be sure, there were only the walls to steal. Jem entered, therefore, unquestioned, ensconced himself in the warehouse, and watched patiently for his chance.

How it came, and what he saw, is perhaps better described from within than without.

Pounder was sitting at a piece of furniture, called by upholsterers a knee-hole table, in a dingy, dirty room, commanding a cheerless view of the backyard already mentioned. There were none of the usual appliances in this apartment that suggested the conveyance of money or property. None of the pigeon-holed drawers lettered down to Z, arguing business habits of nice arrangement and precision; none of the green boxes, fireproof and padlocked, with names painted on them in large black capitals, scorning, as it would seem, to contain parchments of less importance than bonds, title-deeds, and such questionable materials for endless suits of equity and common law. No railed-in desk for the clerks, nor black arm-chair for the client, nor sheaves of uncut quills, nor bundles of papers tied with tape, nor drift of letters on the writing-table, amongst which the visitor's own, appointing an interview, is always uppermost. Save Pounder's umbrella, there were not even the commonest articles of domestic use. Neither fender, fire-irons, nor coal-scuttle. All was bare, all was shabby, and all was dirty.

It was difficult to say for what purpose the room had been intended by the builder; perhaps for a bed-chamber, as a few steps led up to it from the level of the passage, and it opened into another smaller apartment, whence there was no

farther egress, and which could only have served to contain a bath or wardrobe, being lighted but by a bull's-eye in the partition wall, and therefore too dusky to dress, and too close to sleep in.

Although the place promised little of wealth in its aspects and arrangements, yet in the drawers of the knee-hole table, ink-stained and frayed as it looked, were locked away documents worth not only a round sum of money, but the peace and comfort of many a frank, genial, inconsiderate young heart; representing perhaps all the hopes of its future, all the advantages of its past. There were signatures in those recesses to bid mamma cry and papa swear; to mulct younger brothers and sisters of many a loose hundred not in settlement, that would have been very acceptable for the bride's *trousseau*, or the subaltern's promotion; to make a brave lad tremble, and an honourable one prevaricate; to turn the merry, cheerful home of breakfast-time into a scene of reproach, and constraint, and humiliation, when the post came in.

Other rooms in the house were well and even gaudily furnished. The front parlour contained several original pictures of famous Dutch and Italian masters, painted with considerable felicity by a man in the Haymarket, any one of which could be spared at a moment's notice to accommodate a borrower, and replaced forthwith in a different style by the same hand. The drawing-room floor, besides its cracked mirrors, rejoiced in fanciful carving, handsome bronzes, and a heavy chandelier in a canvas bag. There were bedrooms, I believe, above this, but they had been long since dismantled and put away, having nothing but the bare bedsteads left, with store of moths and spiders, cobwebs for hangings; and for a carpet, dust two inches thick.

Notwithstanding the size of the house, however, most of the business was conducted in this dingy back room, the greater portion of which Jem Batters, himself unseen, commanded from the post of observation he had taken up.

Pounder sat writing busily at the table. His large bald forehead, as he bent over his work, conveyed an impression of the utmost respectability and benevolence. There had been rain during the morning, and the garden at Balham was a fortnight earlier than last year. He was inclined, therefore, to look favourably on the world in general, and had experienced more difficulty than usual in hardening his heart to the business standard required. Multiple, walking up and down the room, was immersed in some calculation with which he appeared a good deal dissatisfied. His cheeks were flushed,

and he frowned in a manner that did not improve his beauty. He had stopped short in one of his turns, obviously for a burst of ill-humour, when Jack's ring at the door-bell vibrated through the house.

"Can't you go and see who it is?" exclaimed he angrily, while Pounder deliberately finished a sentence, and wiped his pen on his sleeve. "If it's Overdue, I won't see him!" he holloaed after his partner, who had disappeared down the passage. "And you may tell him so! He's played fast and loose with us long enough. I'll sell him up; I will, by Heaven! as sure as he stands there. Get out, you brute! Holloa! Whose dog's this?"

Four pattering feet having made themselves distinctly heard on the oilcloth outside, now brought their rough little proprietor bodily into the room. Tatters, according to custom, preceded his master, whom Pounder was ushering with great obsequiousness into the office, and thus gave Multiple timely warning of the entrance of Jack Brooke.

Now, it was by no means the money-lender's cue to be known as such to those with whom he associated on terms of equality in general society. He chose to appear among them a gentleman of independent income—well-born, well-bred; a man of position, education, and taste. He liked them to wonder, "who the deuce Multiple was," knowing that, with the world, an object gains by mystery more than it loses by suspicion; but he had no wish that they should be able to identify him with the bill-discounting firm so generally consulted and so universally abused. Above all, he was most anxious that none of the Brooke family should learn the truth, at all events till he had become one of them, and even with a bosom friend like Walter he had been careful to attribute his thorough knowledge of money matters to high betting and large speculations on the Stock Exchange. To have confronted Jack Brooke, whom he felt thoroughly to distrust him, here of all places in the world, would have been destruction.

But Multiple had a quick eye, and recognised the dog in an instant. His first impression was that Walter had come up about the bills, till he heard the elder brother's voice outside the door, and he had just time to make a dive at his hat, and remove it along with himself into the other room, where he resolved to remain in hiding till the interview terminated; exulting the while that prudent, steady-going Jack Brooke was walking like other people into the toils, and that he should soon have the whole family in his power—the elder brother

embarrassed, the younger dishonoured, and the sister compromised.

Whenever this man thought of Helen, something seemed to come over him that imparted a bitter, morbid pleasure to the very act of evil-doing, as if it gratified him to think that the lower he himself fell the deeper would be the degradation to which he would drag her down. How fiercely he longed for that hour! less like one who desires the guerdon of a warm attachment, than one who thirsts for the wild triumph of revenge. Though the image of Miss Brooke filled his heart and brain, his was a sort of love turned, as it were, inside out, that very closely resembled the cruel instinct of hate.

However quick he might be, though, in identifying Tatters, the dog's honest dislike, cherished with canine fidelity, seemed quicker still to recognise the presence of an enemy. He bounced about the room, barking furiously, and scratched hard at the door of communication between the two apartments. Jack Brooke seated himself as desired, apologised to Pounder for the intrusion and ill-behaviour of his favourite.

"He won't leave me for five minutes," said Jack, with pardonable pride; "but he's a keen little brute after vermin, and hasn't learned town manners yet. I'll answer for it, he winds a rat somewhere about now."

Pounder winded a rat too, or thought he did, and resolved to draw cautiously up to his game. It consisted, he hoped, of a fresh, frank, inexperienced young gentleman, short of cash, rich in expectations, willing to make allowance for the tightness of the money-market, and ready to do a post-obit on reasonable terms—say, three for one.

Motioning Jack to a chair, he seated himself at the kneehole table, leaning his elbow thereon to balance a paper-cutter in his large, strong, clean hand. He had not yet mastered the visitor's name, therefore opened the conversation discreetly, with a remark upon the genial temperature, so unusual for the time of the year. He sat opposite the little window of communication, through which he could observe his partner's anxious face.

Multiple was not quite easy about this unexpected arrival, for although it would have pleased him much to see the elder fellow following the younger brother's example, still, like all men who lead a life of duplicity, and who feel themselves permanently in a false position, he mistrusted everything that was unexpected or unaccounted for.

Jack, fronting his new acquaintance, was agreeably surprised at the frank expression of countenance and respectable

appearance, so different from what he expected. Any little awkwardness he may have betrayed at first, which Pounder set down to the usual embarrassment of a borrower, soon disappeared, and he entered on the business that brought him in the most straightforward manner, without delay.

"I believe," said he abruptly, "your name is Pounder, a professional money-lender?"

The other looked hard at the bull's-eye window for instructions, ere he delivered himself of the customary answer.

"The name is correct enough. Excuse me, sir, for observing that you are mistaken in our calling. We are but confidential advisers in matters of pecuniary difficulty. I will not deny that we occasionally make small advances to clients of position and character, on the usual terms."

Jack was a little puzzled at so subtle a distinction; but went straight to the point.

"I am an eldest son," said he. Mr. Pounder bowed low. "Heir to an entailed estate." Mr. Pounder bowed lower. "Anything that passes between us is of course in the strictest confidence." Mr. Pounder bowed till his polished head was visible to the very crown. The action denoted sympathy, reverence, and incorruptible good faith.

"In the strictest confidence," he repeated, with another glance over Jack's head, to make sure his partner was watching, "and without exception taken to any unguarded expressions of remonstrance or friendly warning that may be called forth by our interests in our client's welfare. Young men are apt to be incautious, imprudent, wilfully blind to their own interests. I have sustained abuse, sir, that you would hardly credit, and bad language that I will not pain you by repeating, in this very room, as a return for my earnest entreaties to misguided young gentlemen that they would take a little time and consideration before entailing ruin on their families and themselves. Your dog is very uneasy, sir, and I think there must be a rat somewhere about. We keep that recess locked, and our clerk, who is in the City, has mislaid the key, or we would soon unearth the intruder. I love a rat-hunt still, out of business hours, as well as a younger man."

This frank admission was made to take Jack's attention off the subject they had been discussing. The visitor was shrewd enough to suspect Mr. Pounder's benevolent phrases, and the latter did not fail to observe his suspicion. Tatters, besides, was sniffing about the door of communication with an energy that it was impossible to ignore. Altogether, Pounder thought it best to establish the impossibility of

searching the other room at once, so put his little romance of the key and his rat-catching predilections together, with simplicity that set mistrust at defiance. He spoke the truth so far, that at Balham he would have joined in such a pursuit with the utmost glee; but here, like other mighty hunters, his game was man.

"Be quiet, Tatters!" said Jack, calling the dog beneath his chair, and repressing all outward demonstrations of excitement, save a stifled growl and an angry red eye. "We don't come for rat-catching, Mr. Pounder, or my little terrier here could make you open your eyes, if you care for that sort of thing. My business is of some importance, and, if you please, we will go into it at once. I am an eldest son, as I have already told you. My father is Mr. Brooke, of Bridlemere, near Middlesworth. Perhaps you may have heard the name before?"

Pounder's countenance brightened. He recognised the name at once; for he had bills at the moment almost beneath his hand, bearing that signature, of which his partner had never ceased to impress on him that he could not be too careful, and he knew the drawer of those bills by sight perfectly well. His professional keenness enabled him to trace a family likeness in his present visitor to the embarrassed young officer whom he had accommodated; and his professional instinct hinted the probability that the elder brother, the heir himself, had been recommended by the younger to the same fountain whence he drew his own precarious and costly supplies.

Visions came over him, enhanced by his visitor's appearance, of immediate necessities, inviolable secrecy, mutual convenience, and a heavy post-obit. Not only did Jack look, he thought, like an eldest son; but there was an air of simplicity about his dress, his manners, his square shoulders, his frank, weather-browned face, that argued honesty of purpose, liberality of character, general inexperience in borrowing, and unflinching determination to abide by any bargain that he had once made, however injurious to himself. Here was a prize worth half a dozen such plausible, improvident, necessitous dandies as the brother—a prize that, judiciously handled, and skilfully captured, might by a trifling annual outlay become the making of the firm at his father's death. He looked benevolently interested and concerned.

"I can feel for a young man in difficulties," said he, with a grave paternal air. "I have had much to contend with,

Mr. Brooke (I think you said your name was Brooke); much to contend with in early life myself. Mine is a curious history, and shows how cautious a youth should be to borrow from respectable parties. At five-and-twenty years of age, sir, I had an opening of business that necessitated a small advance of capital. A few, a *very* few thousand pounds was demanded for a share in the excellent firm of which I am now proud to be senior partner. The matter was trifling enough; but I was a young man in those days, Mr. Brooke, and I am sorry to admit, not a very steady one; I could not lay my hand on the sum required, small as it was, and what did I do? Consult some friend of experience and professional standing, to abide by his judgment, and act on his advice? Not a bit of it! I wanted the money. I was in a hurry for the money. I would *have* the money; and I went to an avowed money-lender, a regular bill-discounter, and obtained it, sir, upon terms that, even at this distance of time, I blush to recall. He must have made me pay not less than one hundred per cent.; one hundred per cent., as I sit here, for every shilling he advanced me before I had done with him. And I found out, when it was too late, that the firm itself would have lent me the money on far more liberal terms, trusting to my own undertaking for payment of capital and interest, by quarterly instalments, out of my share in the annual profits. It was a lesson I shall never forget, Mr. Brooke, and I regret it the less that it taught me the caution I needed, and impressed on me in the strongest manner the liberality of our firm. It has always been our mode of doing business. I trust the same system may continue so long as I have the honour to conduct its affairs. Pardon me, Mr. Brooke, this is irrelevant—a little word of warning from an old man to a young one, of which the motive must excuse the impertinence—we will proceed to your business, if you please, at once. Do you desire a temporary advance for immediate necessities? I observe, state the sum, and name your securities. Do you ask my advice as to the prudence of borrowing money in the abstract? I reply emphatically, don't."

Multiple, watching at the window, and listening intently to this peroration, ground his teeth in anger and disgust. "The clumsy ass!" he muttered below his breath, "to try this affectation of honesty with a fellow that, he must see at a glance, is a really honest man. Not to know it's only fit to gull some fool, who is half a rogue already. Idiot! I wish he was up to his neck in his own cabbage-beds! I shouldn't

be the least surprised if he blew the whole business to this blundering, straightforward, hard-headed young clodpole, and put us all in the hole before he has done."

He was in a very uncomfortable position. Closeted in a dusty little room, within ten feet of a critical job, the mismanagement of which he was compelled to witness without interference, because he was afraid to discover himself, Mr. Multiple's face grew darker and darker, and his blood tingled to his finger-ends.

Jack Brooke had listened attentively to the money-lender's tale, and its effect, as his partner foresaw, was the very reverse of what the narrator intended. The young squire had mother-wit enough to detect a false ring in the assumed friendship and sincerity of his senior. Like a fencer who has yet to prove his adversary's strength, he paused a little ere he took up his ground cautiously out of distance, feeling the other's blade, as it were, with a very gentle and inquiring touch.

That other, strong in the maturity of experience and confidence of daily stratagem, engaged boldly and without hesitation. The sooner his visitor's business was done, he thought, and the more effectually, the better. Attributing his silence to a natural diffidence in exposing his affairs, he leaned across the table, and renewed the conversation with great complacence.

"Would it be premature, Mr. Brooke, to suggest a short and general statement on paper, shall we say, of the advance you may require? We can meet your views probably in a variety of ways, any of which would suit our convenience equally well. A life-assurance; a bill at an earlier or later date, indorsed, as a matter of form, by one other signature; an undertaking for repayment, with accumulative interest, on the demise of certain parties. I throw these out as mere suggestions. Whatever you resolve, you can depend upon us, believe me, to consult your interests as carefully as our own."

"Stop a moment," said Jack; "you go fast, Mr. Pounder. I did not come here to borrow money; at least that was not my primary object."

"Glad to hear it, sir; glad to hear it," replied Pounder, by no means unused to such declarations at the opening of proceedings. "If advice is all you require, you've come to the right shop for the article. And we make no charge for it, neither. No 'six-and-eightpennies' here, Mr. Brooke. Any information an old man can give a young one, you are welcome to from me for nothing."

Multiple's attention had been more than once arrested by the visitor's declaration. He knew his man, and was sure that what Jack Brooke said he meant. He listened painfully now, suspecting what was to come, and wishing he had trusted his partner more implicitly in the matter of the bills.

"I am not here as a borrower, Mr Pounder," explained Jack, "so much as a purchaser; though it is quite possible I must be the former in order to become the latter. I wish to have no reserve, but to treat you with the confidence I expect in return. You are acquainted with my brother, Walter Brooke, a subaltern in the Dancing Hussars?"

Pounder glanced at the bull's-eye, and detecting no signal for a negative, affected to task his memory severely ere he replied—

"I think I have the name somewhere on my books. An agreeable, well-informed young gentleman, if I remember right. I am proud to make the acquaintance of his brother."

"He has been here not long ago," continued Jack, fixing his eyes on the other, "and borrowed three hundred pounds of you in this very room on a bill at three months."

"Three hundred pounds at three months," repeated Pounder thoughtfully. "Very possibly, very possibly. You must allow me to refer back. I cannot carry these trifling matters in my head, but I am very scrupulous in my entries, very!"

To Multiple's extreme vexation, watching him through the bull's-eye, he unlocked one of the drawers beneath his hand, and produced a file of papers, at the top of which was the bill in question, and its duplicate.

Wetting his thumb deliberately, he turned them slowly over, checking them off one by one all the way through and back again, till he returned to the document he wanted. Having thus gained a few moments, during which he ran over some complicated mental arithmetic, he laid two papers on the table before him and observed—

"You are right, Mr. Brooke. Quite correct, sir. Here is the bill to which you allude. Ah! three months — three hundred. This, I presume, is your brother's signature; not very legible, but enough for the purpose, and indorsed by one De Rolle, a subaltern officer in the same regiment."

"Mr. Pounder!" exclaimed Jack eagerly, "I don't understand these things. I don't profess to be a man of business. The bill cannot be worth more than three hundred pounds at most. What shall I give you to take it away with me now,

this moment? Name your own terms; I will engage to find means of paying the price!"

Pounder smiled blandly, well satisfied. It would, of course, be a good stroke of business to obtain the elder brother for a debtor rather than the younger.

In his own opinion, and he had considerable sagacity in such matters, Walter Brooke's paper was about the least valuable with which he was concerned. In the matter of solvency, he rated the hussar very little above Mr. Overdue, while here was a substitute offering himself eagerly, with "eldest son" written on every feature and apparent in every movement. He would have closed gladly with the offer after only the usual modest reluctance that wary old men, as well as prudent young women, think well to affect in accepting the fulfilment of their wishes, when catching sight of his partner's face at its post of observation, he was disconcerted to perceive the strong expression of warning and disapproval it conveyed.

"Do I quite understand you, Mr. Brooke?" said he, fidgeting with the papers. "Is it your object to take up your brother's liabilities, or are you desirous of a further advance on your joint security?"

"I speak plain enough," answered Jack shortly. "What I want is that bill of Walter Brooke now lying beneath your hand. How much less than three hundred will you take for it *now*, at this moment? That point settled, we will consider how the sum can be raised on my personal security afterwards."

Multiple still telegraphed violently to refuse. Pounder was a good deal puzzled, not so much by the purchaser's anxiety, though that was sufficiently unaccountable, as by his partner's reluctance to dispose, on advantageous terms, of what they had both reason to believe would eventually prove a bad debt; and thinking to gain a little time, and perhaps elucidate the mystery, he observed quietly—

"There are two bills of Mr. Walter Brooke here in my possession; which of them do you propose to redeem?"

Multiple groaned in spirit. Slipping from the window, he stole softly to the door and held it ajar, uncertain how to act. Tatters, already sharply rebuked for interference, dared not remonstrate, but was obliged to content himself with a deep angry, continuous growl beneath his master's chair.

The blood flushed to Jack's forehead.

"Two of them!" said he. "How d'ye mean? I have consulted Walter. I am in my brother's confidence. There must be something wrong here!"

"There must indeed," answered Pounder gravely, and not entirely without sympathy for the modest, guileless nature with which he had to deal. At Balham he would have gone into his cause hand over head. Even here, in the office, he was sorry for him, though he meant to accommodate him with a post-obit just the same. "I fear there *must* be something wrong, Mr. Brooke. If you will keep your dog quiet, I will detail the circumstances as far as my memory serves me. I have the date of your brother's last visit in my day-book. Here it is. On that occasion I cashed for him one of these bills—the date of which is also entered — deducting the customary discount; a mere trifle for accommodation. Cast your eye down that column in the last date. On that day, sir, in the usual course of business, I became possessed of another bill of your brother for the same sum, indorsed by the same party, except that it seems to have been drawn two days subsequently, an exact *fac-simile* of the previous one. You observe, therefore, that it would take six hundred pounds to cover the whole amount advanced to Mr. Walter Brooke upon his own and his friend's security. Have you any reason to suspect, sir, that either of these documents can have been tampered with? To speak plain English, Mr. Brooke, this business is not entirely unlike a case of forgery."

Now, Pounder had his own reasons for thus desiring to elucidate the mystery that hung over these two bills. It was obvious that his partner knew something more about them than was apparent on the surface; also, that he was strangely anxious to keep them both in his hands, as though their possession by another would compromise himself or someone in whom he was interested. Not in love alone is it a wise maxim to "trust me all in all, or not at all." People in the same boat should row the same stroke if they would make way against the stream. Had Multiple told his partner candidly why he wished to hold these two documents *in terrorem* over Walter's head, Pounder would probably have laid himself out on his oar with his usual energy and perseverance. Now he was backing water when the other wanted him to pull. Nay, he was not unwilling to discover something to his principal's prejudice that might serve as a set-off against the power which heavy pecuniary obligations, and a knowledge of one or two transactions not exactly sanctioned by the laws of the land, gave the latter over himself. This was why he hinted his suspicions of foul play to Jack, disregarding, as if it were not there, a white face at the door peering right into the room, working with suppressed

anxiety, entreaty, and resentment, till its expression was truly diabolical.

On the mention of the two bills, where he only expected to find one, a horrible suspicion had crossed Jack Brooke's mind. He reflected on his brother's manner both before and during the time of his confession at Bridlemere; on his obvious mental suffering for a considerable period; his restlessness; his irritability; his anxiety about trifles, so unlike his usual disposition; especially on the agitation he betrayed in making an avowal which, after all, admitted nothing more criminal than the common imprudence of raising money on a bill; and recalling these suspicious symptoms, he shuddered while he came to the conclusion that there was some gross fraud connected with this transaction, of which his brother was cognisant, if, indeed, he had not been its originator. Pounder's last sentence drove the nail home to the quick. Jack collected all his energies, and held his breath while he thought what was best to be done. There was still one hope left — his brother's signature might have been imitated by some skilful forger. He was angry with himself that he could not feel thoroughly convinced this was the case.

"May I look at that bill?" he asked quietly, pointing to the uppermost of those which lay beneath Pounder's hand.

"Certainly," said the latter, turning his eyes purposely from the door, and spreading the document out on the table, but keeping hold of it at top and bottom with both strong hands the while.

Jack studied it minutely. He could have taken his oath to his brother's signature; with that of Ragman de Rolle he was not acquainted, but he examined it as critically as a detective or an expert. Not a dash nor a dot in that officer's bold, irregular handwriting escaped his observation.

"Now the other," said he deliberately, having taken a good five minutes to peruse the first.

Before complying, Pounder locked the examined bill carefully away in a drawer. This unexpected precaution did not escape the visitor's observation, and roused his suspicions to the utmost. Multiple breathed again.

Still keeping his hand on it, Pounder spread the second bill out under Jack's nose, who treated it like the first. Again there could be no doubt of his brother's handwriting. He could have sworn to it here also; but he turned pale when he examined the indorsement. Ragman de Rolle's name was written feebly, neatly, with far less boldness and freedom than on the other bill. Had he been trusted with a full

confession, Jack would not have suspected Walter of a heavier and more dangerous crime than he had really committed. The conviction of his younger brother's guilt went through the elder like a shot. He trembled—he turned pale. His features quivered from the shock. Then he rallied with the very peril of the crisis. Though a thousand thoughts of home, his father, Helen, Uncle Archie chased each other wildly through his brain, the one idea predominated over all, that Walter must be saved at any cost, at any sacrifice. If he could obtain possession of this bill his brother would at least be free from danger of detection. Time would be gained; arrangements made; a compromise would be effected; but the bill he *must* have!

"I will take it up," said he, affecting carelessness, though his voice trembled. "Hand it over. I can afford to pay for my fancy."

He had resolved to accept any eventual loss, however ruinous, and would have proved, as Pounder's instincts told him, an extremely valuable customer; but the money-lender did not dare disobey his partner, and shook his head in mild deprecation.

"Not business, Mr. Brooke!" said he. "Excuse me; not business. In matters of this kind I must consult the firm."

Jack's eye was on the bill—keen, glittering, vigilant—as it had rested in merrier days on some twisting cricket-ball when he kept the University wickets to professional bowling.

"I make you a liberal offer," he urged. "Your own terms!"

"And I must decline it," answered Pounder, polite, but obviously determined.

He moved his hand as he spoke, probably with the intention of locking the coveted article out of sight, but the practised wicket-keeper was too quick for him. Jack pounced at it like lightning, and effected a brilliant catch; still the money-lender's grasp, though a thought too late, fell like an iron fetter about his wrists, and he struggled in vain to shake them free.

"Stand off, man!" exclaimed Jack, his spirits rather than his temper rising with the encounter. "I WILL have it, I tell you! Upon my soul, I'll strike if you don't let go!"

"Two can play at that game, Mr. Brooke," replied the other, not entirely without a fierce enjoyment of his own in the prospective set-to. He was a powerful, muscular man, fond of exercise, and had not engaged in what he called a breather for years.

One or two heavy lurches, and the knee-hole table across which they wrestled came to the floor with a crash. Pounder's foot caught in it as it fell, and Jack was able to free his left hand, in which, however, he did *not* hold the bill. He was no less surprised than encouraged to find no alarm given by his antagonist; no cry for "Police!" no indication of assistance being within earshot. His hopes rose. He would get clear off with the bill after all; but his blood was up, too, and he meant real fighting now if he was opposed. Both men breathed harder, fiercer, and their eyes were beginning to shine.

"Will you let go?" hissed out Jack savagely, between his teeth, while he got his arm back to strike.

"Not if I know it!" replied Pounder, in a hoarse whisper, and these were the only words that passed.

There was a dull, heavy sound, and the money-lender reeled and lost his footing. Struck just behind the temple, he felt his senses failing, and everything in a swim all round him. Nevertheless he clung manfully to his adversary, who, with another blow, felt confident of getting clear off, prize and all. His hand was back to repeat it, when a crash resounded in his ears, a flare of yellow flame passed before his eyes, then came a dull, numbed tingling, a sickly sensation of repose on an inclined plane in the dark, and a vague peevish consciousness of a familiar voice wandering about him, saying—

"I wouldn't have believed they put such good horn into the handles of these cotton umbrellas!"

The Struggle for the Papers.

CHAPTER XXIV

A BROKEN HEAD

THE handle of a cotton umbrella, when the horn is really sound, may prove, on occasion, a very efficient weapon of offence. Jem Batters, amused, excited, and intensely pleased, witnessed the whole skirmish from the post of observation he had so skilfully taken up. He saw Jack close with Pounder, and smiled in grim satisfaction at their style, as he called it, when the men took hold. He scarce repressed audible approval of the masterly manner with which the young squire, whose face he recognised, delivered his left ; and he did exclaim " Foul, Foul ! " loud and distinct, when Multiple, white and scowling, stole in behind the successful combatant, and, glancing vainly here and there for a weapon, seized his partner's umbrella to lay open a good four inches of Jack Brooke's head, dropping him prostrate and senseless at his feet. All this, I say, he saw to the best advantage; yet, perhaps, had the partners been aware they were thus overlooked, their consultation, hurried and frightened as it was, would have been more hurried and frightened still.

Multiple, though he affected a brutal carelessness while he praised the strength of the umbrella, looked down on his work a minute afterwards with intense confusion and dismay. Pounder's hard head, indeed, soon recovered the knock it had sustained ; but his adversary lay senseless on the carpet, face foremost, where he fell, with a dark stream winding slowly, slowly, from his brown hair along the floor ; and Tatters, who had barked furiously through the conflict, unnoticed by either of the men, though he made his teeth meet in Pounder's boot, sitting on end at his master's side, lamented him in a series of loud, dismal, and long-protracted howls.

" It's a devil of a mess," said Pounder, panting for breath, and wiping the perspiration off his face, while he slowly recovered the effect of his exertions. " He's a right good man, though ! I don't know I ever had hold of so good a man at the weight. I think I could have tackled him by

myself, too. I was coming round again when you interfered between us. You must have hit uncommon hard, Mr. Multiple. See! you've broke my new umbrella all to shivers. Well, we must bring him to, and hush the whole thing up the best way we can."

So speaking, Pounder bent over the body of his late antagonist, and lifted his head from the floor to inspect the injuries he had received.

"Why, he don't move!" exclaimed the acting partner in great consternation. "Quick, Mr. Multiple! Water, water, for the love of Heaven! There's a ewer somewhere in the front parlour. This is a bad business—a bad business, I fear!"

Multiple's face was ghastly white, and he trembled visibly; but there was something of the beast of prey even in his fear, and he looked the murderer he might have become, while he whispered huskily, "Better make sure. Help me to make sure, Pounder, and put him out of the way for good and all!"

He quailed beneath the other man's look. There was in it contempt, defiance, menace; the indignation of a bold nature at a coward's cruelty; the warning flash of a long-repressed spirit that seemed to say, "Have a care! My blood is up, too, and it would take but little to make me lay you there beside him with a blow!"

In that moment each man felt how much he hated the other; but Pounder's spirit was, for the time, in the ascendant; and when he imperiously repeated his command to go for water, the other slunk from the room like a beaten hound.

At his return, they propped the sufferer to the best of their abilities, doing all that Pounder's experience suggested to restore consciousness, though in vain. Jack breathed, indeed, but it was with a heavy, stertorous snore, and he gave no other signs of vitality whatever.

"This will never do, Mr. Multiple," exclaimed his partner, after a last unavailing effort. "The man will die if we can't get a doctor to him. This is something more than a common crack on the head. Stop a moment, sir; there's a surgeon lives next door. I'm sure of it, for I knew a lad taken there from a cab-accident last winter. We must carry him in directly. I see nothing else for it."

"It'll blow the whole thing," said the other unwillingly. "What a fool you were, Pounder, to show him the bill!"

"Not so bad as if he died in our hands," expostulated his partner. "How should you like a coroner's inquest, Mr. Multiple? and a jury to view the premises? and you and me

shifting from the dock to the witness-box, according to which could most criminate the other? I tell you, if he dies, that umbrella would hang either of us or both!"

He must have hated him very sincerely, or he never could have taken such delight in his confederate's discomfiture, being himself in an equally perilous situation.

Multiple was quite unnerved. The cold sweat stood on his face, and his teeth chattered, but his cunning did not forsake him, and dipping his handkerchief in the pool on the carpet, he smeared the edge of the passage steps carefully with blood.

"We must call it a fit, Pounder," said he, "and get somebody to swear he was subject to them. You must hide the umbrella away carefully, and take an opportunity of destroying it unseen. Let us have our story perfect, my good friend, that we may both tell the same. A client comes in whom you don't know. You can swear you never saw him before; so, of course, you don't know him. He seems labouring under excitement and is incoherent in his talk. You are used to people being incoherent in their talk when they want to borrow money. This will raise a laugh, and that is always in your favour. Seeing the man so excited, you endeavour to dissuade him from entering on business till he is cooler, and entreat him to call again. He leaves you in a towering passion, misses his footing on the slippery oil-cloth outside, and falls with the back of his head against the edge of the top step, which inflicts the fatal injury. For a few minutes you are paralysed, and know not how to act. Then you remember your medical friend next door, and seek assistance to carry him in. I need not appear at all. Or stay, I am passing by at that moment. You know me, though not intimately, and entreat me to help you. I comply, as any Christian would. I am on the Continent, travelling from place to place, address very uncertain. My evidence would be quite superfluous. I need not even be called."

Pounder smiled grimly. It was his partner all over; but he felt to fear him less now than he had done for many months. He was himself very callous to personal apprehension, and it was worth a considerable risk to have gained, by the events of the last half-hour, so strong a hold over one who had long had him in his power. A fair upstanding tussle, too, with a man of his own strength and weight, had done him a world of good. Altogether, Pounder felt more like what he was at Balham, though conscious at the same time of being mixed up with a very awkward catastrophe in the Strand.

"While the story is making," said he, with a certain sardonic humour, "the subject of it will die, unless we bestir ourselves pretty smartly. Here! catch hold of that cloth. Put it over his face. No need that everybody should see it, going from one door to the other. Wait while I lift his shoulders. Now help me with the legs. By Jove, what a fine-made chap he is! D—n it, man, don't hurt the dog!"

Multiple had inflicted a savage kick upon poor Tatters, who resented interference with the lower part of his master's body. Nothing daunted, the terrier would have made at him again, but something seemed to remind him all at once that this was no time for bickering, and he fell in with the mournful procession, walking peacefully behind the bearers and their burden, utterly dejected and forlorn.

The partners paused in the passage while one ran out to knock at the neighbouring door, and returned quickly to his task. No need, as Pounder said, that they should stand longer in the street than they could help. The precaution, though judicious, was unnecessary. There was but one solitary passenger, an ill-looking fellow in a shabby velveteen coat, to witness their proceedings, and he seemed quite unconscious of their presence. He could have found out, indeed, nothing he did not know before, however closely he had scanned them; but whatever his object might be, his interest seemed chiefly centred in a sack carried beneath his arm.

When Miss Prince's door was opened, however, by the astonished maid-of-all-work, Pounder, looking back for the dog, observed the street was empty, and Tatters was gone.

The consternation created through the whole establishment by this startling arrival may be easily imagined. The maid-of-all-work, not subject to fainting fits unless when excited by drink, and debarred, therefore, from the resource of a good, hopeless, helpless swoon, screamed lustily, tapping the floor with alternate feet, as though dancing on hot plates of iron. Her shrieks brought Miss Prince to the landing on the stairs, who stood there for at least a minute, speechless, spellbound, holding up her gloved hands in an attitude of overwhelming horror and consternation. She had scarcely made her appearance in this tragic character, ere Jane rushed from the upper floor with her cap-ribbons flaunting behind her, and Dot clinging to her skirts. Having left her younger charges safe, though insubordinate, in the nursery, she was less disposed than the others to put an alarming construction on the disturbance, and expressed her opinion audibly, and

with strong marks of disapproval, that it was "only a drunken man, some friend of the lodger! and what business had they to bring him here?"

Mrs. George was engaged on a shopping expedition with her husband, unfortunately for Miss Prince, who would otherwise have fallen back literally and metaphorically on the assistance of her pupil. The strong, white arms would have supported, and the ample person sheltered the poor little governess, while Mrs. George's habits of command and tendency to take the entire management of everything and everybody about her, would have been invaluable in a crisis like the present. Seeing, however, that she was cheapening calico as far off as Regent Street, it was no use wishing for her. Philip, of course, was at his business; but, fortunately, the most important person of all, namely, Doctor Blair, was within.

I believe it was Dot's voice, rather than any unusual sounds in the hall, that brought him out of his little laboratory in the back parlour. As his gaunt figure emerged from that retreat, it came in contact with Pounder's broad back, and looking over that stalwart bearer's head, the doctor perceived at once that some serious accident, requiring his professional assistance, must have taken place. Blair's eccentricities were chiefly apparent when off duty. A call to action seemed to dispel them at once; and when his professional instincts were in the ascendant, he could behave like other people. With a glance at Dot, to make sure her precious safety was in no way compromised, for the child's curly locks and round astonished eyes were sufficiently conspicuous in the throng, he whipped his coat off, turned up his shirt-sleeves, and pushed Pounder aside from his place at the sufferer's shoulders in the twinkling of an eye.

"In here, mon! in here," said he, partly pulling the body, and partly hustling the bearers into the front parlour, which constituted Philip Stoney's bedroom. "There'll no' be a toom space to dandle a cat in yon bit box where I keep my instruments. Come in ben, mon, and lay the puir thing on the bed. See till I tak' the cloth off, an' I'll sune redd him up, 'gin he be na clean past the joiner's skill. Ay, ay, it's been a gey clean lick, yon! I've seen a mon clinkit doun on the stanes as deed's a nit wi' less!"

Talking the whole time, he stripped the covering from off Jack's face, propped him gently on the pillows, carefully laying clean towels beneath his still bleeding head, applied restoratives which, to a certain extent, acted at once, snipped

away the brown locks matted now with blood, and did everything that surgery and sympathy together could accomplish for the recovery of the patient; but in all his evolutions, and notwithstanding that his attention seemed completely engrossed with the task, he contrived to interpose his person between his two visitors and the door.

"Bide a wee," said the doctor, with a hitch of his gaunt body in the way, as Multiple tried to sidle quietly past, and make his escape unobserved. "Bide a wee, mon, or we ken if the lad's deed or alive. Hey! tak' yon bason, an' haud it *here,* the height o' my knee. Catch hold o' yon bit napkin. Canny, mon! Canny! I'm sayin'! Though it's joiner's wark, ye ken, it's no' a mantelpiece ye're mendin', but a mon's heed!"

Thus did Doctor Blair skilfully contrive to keep Multiple within reach; nor was it until his experience had been satisfied life was not possibly endangered, that he relaxed his vigilance to inquire, in a franker and less suspicious tone, the origin of the accident.

Pounder told their story as agreed upon. He was unable, he said, to identify the gentleman, their conversation had been exceedingly short, and confined to business matters. The gentleman seemed flushed and excited. He had himself remarked a strange sleepy expression in the eye; so much so, that he suggested they should defer anything conclusive to a second interview. The gentleman walked out hurriedly, Pounder should say, under great excitement. No sooner was he in the passage, than he fell with a heavy crash, cutting his head against the step. He might have slipped, for the oil-cloth was very slippery; but Pounder was inclined to think he had a fit of some sort, and no doubt he was subject to them.

To this lucid statement Doctor Blair listened very attentively, making only a strange grimace at the mention of the word "fit"; then he turned sharp round on Multiple, and asked if he knew anything of the other gentleman, or the young man whom they both brought in?

Multiple knew the other gentleman slightly; had made his acquaintance in the City; believed him to be a most respectable man; was passing the door by chance at the time of this deplorable accident, and rendered what little assistance he could, as a matter of course. With regard to the sufferer, really could not speak positively. It was difficult to identify features when in that state of collapse. Mr. Blair's professional experience (he believed he had the

pleasure of speaking to Mr. Blair—he begged pardon, *Doctor* Blair). Well, Doctor Blair's professional experience knew this better than he did, and that he had professional experience was obvious from his skilful treatment of the patient, now, he hoped, in a fair way of recovery. They were both much indebted to him for his kindness, and the other gentleman would take care that any expenses incurred should be repaid. He was not staying in town himself, and was even at the present moment very much engaged, and desirous to be off.

The doctor supposed that he "had gotten a name and an' address, like other folk."

Certainly, his name was Francis. John Francis, Esq., Pavilion Hotel, Folkestone. He was only in London for the day; and, indeed, was about to return to the Continent forthwith.

All this sounded plausible enough. Blair, though not quite satisfied, was forced to content himself with it. There seemed no pretext for attributing foul play to either of these gentlemen; no sufficient reason for placing the affair in the hands of the police. He did not think much of the last speaker, with his flashy dress and pretentious manners; but even if the patient's injuries should take a fatal turn, the other party would be forthcoming, no doubt. He knew the other party by sight, as a householder next door. Being a lodger himself, Mr. Blair had great faith in the respectability of householders. The name, he now ascertained, was Pounder. Well, he must look to Mr. Pounder, in the event of an inquiry becoming necessary. What he did not like in the business was the suggestion of a fit; and he kept muttering, in a jerking, uncomfortable sort of way, "Fett, indeed! Fett! Whatna like fett's yon, to cut a gash in a mon's *occiput* 'hree inches long, and as deep as a dyke-back? Weel, weel, there's some would ha' redded him up waur nor Andrew Blair. I ken fine the way to clout a broken heed, wha but me? I've sat an' sorted them by twanties. It was, ay, 'Whaur's Blair? I'm wantan' Blair. Rin for Doctor Blair!'

> Cows' milk an' mares' milk,
> An' every beast that bears milk,
> Between Saint Johnstoun and Dundee,
> Come a' to me—come a' to me."

Then he turned to Pounder and told him point-blank that he should hold him accountable for the whole transaction, both to the friends of the patient and to the public, should any

inquiries be hereafter instituted—a responsibility which the money-lender gladly accepted, feeling he was thus further neutralising the obligations that existed between his partner and himself.

As soon as Jack had been made pretty comfortable on Philip Stoney's bed, though he had not yet recovered consciousness, Pounder took his leave, Multiple having departed directly he could do so without appearing too unfeeling. Blair then proceeded upstairs to reconcile Miss Prince to this invasion of her premises, and found that lady in a towering passion, at least for *her*. In anyone of less equable temper it would have been but mild disapproval. "She had no notion," she said, "of her house being turned into an hospital. Why didn't they take the poor thing *to* the hospital, or the public-house, or the workhouse, or somewhere? and she was surprised at Doctor Blair, *that* she was; so inconsiderate. She should have thought he knew better; *that* she should!"

The doctor was not unskilled in the very rudiments of his profession, nor ignorant how the gentle sex may be most readily brought round, under anything like discomposure or vexation. He was well aware that in such cases it is sound practice to eschew argument, soothe irritation, and stimulate curiosity.

"Miss Prince," said he, with a certain pomp that he had found imposed successfully on his landlady, "I've no' got to be told the day that ye're mair a Samauritan than a Londoner. I'm no' sayin' but yon lad in the front parlour may ha' fall'n among thieves. There's a mystery somewhere, my good leddy, an' a pirn it'll tak' time to unwind. A bonny lad, he is, too, an' an awfu' clink he's gotten in his brain-pan, if brains he behove to have like you an' me. Pairfect quiet, mem, an' a good sleep, once he's sensible, may bring him round; but it's a doubtful case, my good leddy; a doubtful case; an' I would like weel to get your opinion, 'gin ye would step doun, an' tak' a look of him. Ye're a quiet body, Miss Prince, an' your foot falls as light as a fairy's."

Could any woman, especially any *little* woman, exulting in the airy proportions of her figure, and secretly proud of her feet, resist such a proposal, so beautifully put?

Miss Prince smiled blandly, nay affectionately, in her tall lodger's face, and followed him downstairs like a middle-aged sylph. It needed but one peep into the front parlour, where Jack Brooke lay, to convert her feelings of disapproval into the warmest sympathy. She saw a towel steeped in

blood on the floor, a long figure prostrate on the bed, a scatter of brown hair and another red-stained cloth on the pillow; and though she sickened and trembled, while her eyes filled with tears, the brave little woman whispered her readiness to remain all day, if necessary, at her post, as nurse to the sufferer.

This, however, was by no means Blair's object. Having won her over so judiciously, he was now only anxious to get her out of the room, and Miss Prince went upstairs "all of a twitter," as she observed, without identifying Jack Brooke; having seen, indeed, nothing of him but his blood and the back of his bandaged head.

Doctor Blair, though, had risen fifty per cent. in his landlady's good opinion with the events of the morning. "Such a skilful operator, my dear," as she afterwards observed to Mrs. George Stoney, in furnishing a confidential report of all that had taken place. "Not that I saw him at work, of course; but his manipulation, I understand, is considered by the profession perfection. And so gentlemanly with it. Reminds me of my poor uncle — military, you know; and such a fine figure of a man! but affable to a degree. I'm sure when he came to take the lodgings I'd no idea. It only shows how people may be deceived. I do assure you, Isabella, when he took me down to the poor young man's room, and I saw the bandages and the blood, and all, on the floor, I felt that if I hadn't had such entire confidence in him, both professionally and as a perfect gentleman, I must have dropped. It's been quite an adventure, dear, hasn't it? But we mustn't make a noise talking, as our good doctor pronounces that perfect quiet — with skilful treatment and nourishing food, of course — but that perfect quiet is indispensable for recovery."

From Miss Prince's raptures it may be gathered that her scientific lodger had made a rapid and effectual conquest of his landlady, and had gained in a few minutes what she would have termed a large share of her esteem. The only intimation, however, she vouchsafed him of this favourable state of feeling was a mild request that he would partake of their family tea upstairs, in Mrs. Stoney's sitting-room, at seven o'clock — an invitation which suited the doctor remarkably well, inasmuch as he was at that moment meditating the removal of his patient, by means of his own strong arms and the stout maid-of-all-work's help, to his bedroom on the drawing-room floor, which he would vacate for a shake-down in the sitting-room adjoining, and where he could

have him under his own hourly surveillance, especially during the night. Doctor Blair was a great man for "watching a case," exemplifying the necessity of such vigilance by the following metaphor:—

"The whole art of surgery, an' the pharmacopœia to boot, 's just a bung in a bar'l. Gin ye dinna want the bar'l wasted, ye'll keep your eye on the bung; aince it's oot, there's nae mair drink till the neist brewin'."

Jack Brooke then lay, all unconscious, outside Philip Stoney's bed; and the latter, plodding on, column after column, with laborious pen, little dreamed that his daily life was again to be interwoven with associations he loved so dearly for Helen's sake. *Her* brother! Could he have guessed the truth, I question if the clerk's accounts would have come right that day, if correct orders would have been given to travellers or light porters, and necessary letters written without mistakes by post-time. Business men are sometimes in love, too; but it is not a business transaction: and I would rather myself take a clerk who had been married a few years, and was familiar with the blessing, than one on the eve of entering the holy state.

Philip Stoney had tried hard to shake off the influence of his dream, and succeeded as a right-thinking, resolute man always does succeed; but though the vision had departed, there was a faded and reflected light still left. He was not happier—far from it; but he was better; wiser, sadder, quieter, but indubitably better, and this, I think, is usually the effect wrought on a noble nature by deep sorrow of the heart. It suffers in silence, and therefore, while it suffers, it reflects. Joy makes her favourites genial, frank, high-spirited, and out-spoken; but grief teaches her pupils purity, sympathy, self-sacrifice, and trust. Her lessons are hard indeed to learn, and harder to forget; but I think they will not leave us with the rest of our education; and when we have done with the training of the body and the teaching of the intellect, we shall find they were the true schooling of the soul. Philip's early life had fitted him as well to obtain mastery over self as to battle with the world. Habits of business form, perhaps, the best of all mere physical groundworks on which to build up a character of self-reliance and self-restraint, producing, as they seldom fail to do, a tendency to close reasoning and constant mental supervision. That system of taking stock is a wonderful up-rooter of false ideas, a wonderful leveller of self-conceit. A man who is exact in trifles will seldom deceive himself in important matters, just

as the reckoner who adds his pence up correctly is little liable to make mistakes when he reaches the column that sets forth the pounds.

An athlete of mere average energy may easily overtax his muscles to the detriment of his mind. Excess of physical exertion, even when beneficial to the frame, robs the brain of that mysterious fluid which constitutes its motive power, and for which science has yet to find a name, so that while body and mind act and react on each other with surprising fidelity, the grosser slave of the two is extremely prone to fail his fellow-workman should he find his share of the labour one jot more than he considers his due. The youth who turns his attention to becoming a wrestler will, even if he succeeds in his ambition, never be more than

The best wrestler on the green,

and the gymnasium, with all its advantages, is not the best school from which to turn out a truly successful man.

A liberal education, as it is called, on the other hand, confined far too exclusively to the ornaments of literature, is prone to produce nothing better than a mere elegant scholar, whose very studies have taught him to relish those luxuries of the intellect which waste and enervate the character, just as stimulants sap and destroy the frame. He may write a pleasing romance, perhaps, or a fine poem, but he will not be found in the front rank of those who further the good work with hand and brain. He will neither be a great statesman, a great soldier, a great orator, philosopher, discoverer, or philanthropist. To be great, requires not only the comprehensive mind that embraces the widest views, but also the keen perception that detects the slightest flaw, the orderly exactitude that pays scrupulous attention to details. A bad man of business is never a really good man at anything in the world.

Helen's training, too, like that of Philip, had during her earlier years been of a kind to elevate her out of self. Though an only daughter, living with a father and two brothers, she had not been subject to the over-indulgence such a position usually entails. Her father's calls on her time and patience had served to teach her the hard lesson very soon, and she had profited by it.

The last person Helen ever thought of was Miss Brooke; and now, in her great sorrow, this habit, ingrained in her nature, of considering others before herself, alone enabled her

to bear the daily trials of the present and to face the gloomy perspective of the future.

There was one indulgence, however, notwithstanding her fortitude, to which Helen clung with strange pertinacity. It was her afternoon walk, when she was dismissed attendance on her father during the hour or two of his customary slumber.

Wet or dry, she scarcely ever missed it now; and the servants at Bridlemere, taking note, according to custom, and discussing with great freedom their young lady's doings, though they wondered that she always took the same direction, agreed that "she looked very peaking, poor thing; and the walk, no doubt, did her a world of good!"

Even the squire, feeble as he was, and engrossed with the new medicine that was to restore his failing powers so miraculously, found time to observe Helen's altered looks, and found fault, with the irritability of self-reproach, because she was so pale.

On the very day that Jack had gone up to London in secrecy—nay, at the very hour he was lying unconscious on Philip Stoney's bed, and Blair was making arrangements to move that fine helpless form upstairs to his own, the squire was croaking out a feeble remonstrance on his daughter's habit of sitting brooding with her face so near the fire.

"It burns every atom of colour off your cheek, Helen," he quavered out, as angry as if deprecating some loss of property, or injury to himself; "and you will be the only Brooke, from old Dorcas downwards, ever known to wear a pale face. In my time, young people didn't use to sit moping over the fire all the best part of a spring morning. They bustled about, like bees in a beehive, from sunrise to sunset, as merry as May-day. I can't think what has come to them all now. What does Jack mean by bouncing off like this, without a 'By your leave,' or 'With your leave'? and who is to see Marks, I should like to know, about the road-rate? I'd go myself, if I thought it would hold up (Helen, put my gloves along with the hat, instead of laying them across the stick, where they're no use); but it looks like rain —uncommon like rain, and it wouldn't do to get wet, first day of going out, and all. Middlesworth market? What do you mean about Middlesworth market? He never would go there without seeing me first! Then Walter's forgotten his old father, since he's been so much at Tollesdale. Walter and — what's his name? — and you, Helen, all undutiful!

Three undutiful children! Not you, my darling! not you!" he continued, whimpering, as his better feelings obtained the mastery, and he remembered his daughter's gentleness and patience, and sad, uneventful life, wearisome for one so young. Then he pulled her face down to his own, and kissed it, wetting it with his tears; but forgot them long ere they were dry, and so maundering on about his broth and his medicine, dropped asleep at his usual time, and left the poor, pale, fond attendant free for an hour at least.

So Helen put on her walking things, and emerged from the breakfast-room window—she always went out at the breakfast-room window now—then proceeded right across the park, till she reached a clump of trees on a rising ground, from which, looking back, Bridlemere house could be seen plainly, but beyond which the slope of the hill hid it from the eye. Here she stopped to gather a violet or two nestling under the old elms, and hid them in her bosom. But she kissed the sweet flowers tenderly before she put them away, and a drop fell on them that was clear and pure as the dew of heaven, though it came but from a poor, aching, earthly heart. She had always loved violets from a child, but their fragrance had never been so painful yet so dear to her as now. Then she walked on with slower and sadder step, avoiding a certain stile at which she remembered to have been affronted once by the unwelcome courtesy of a stranger, who—was no stranger now!

She started, as if she had been stung, and hurried fiercely forward in the direction of Dame Batters's cottage. She paid a visit there most days now, and was welcome as an angel of light to the poor old woman, who loved to relate her troubles to "our Miss Brooke" over and over again, never tired of descanting on her Jem's disappearance; her own rheumatism; the changes—dear me! the changes wrought by time; the wickedness of Middlesworth; the fire at the brewery, and the sad loss sustained by the town in the ruin of Stoney Brothers.

CHAPTER XXV

A BUNDLE OF STICKS

NE, two, three, four, five, six; and one for the pot! I've often heard my uncle declare—a military man like yourself, doctor—that weak tea was as unwholesome as weak brandy-and-water. Relaxing, he said, and deleterious at the same time, while strong tea braces the nerves, and strong 'grog,' I think he called it, gives a fillip to the system. Only think!"

Miss Prince sat in great state at her tea-table in the front bedroom, now used conjointly by herself and the Stoneys as a refectory. They took their meals together; the little woman contriving in this, as in many other ways, to save her lodgers' pockets at the expense of her own. On the present occasion, with a playful application of the old schoolgirl vocabulary, she persisted in considering the party as her treat; in no way disguising the fact that it was held for the greater glorification of her new favourite, Doctor Blair. She and Isabella had therefore attired themselves in their garments of state; the latter looking very handsome in a black satin dress that had already done a good deal of duty on festive occasions; but that set off to advantage her white skin, her massive proportions, and the braids of her long, silky dark hair. Miss Prince herself was dressed in a brocade of an enormous pattern, not unlike the papering of a very old-fashioned bedroom, but of a costly texture, which for value, and indeed antiquity, might have belonged to the Queen of Sheba. It seems a peculiarity of this particular fabric that it is prone to force much of the wearer's person into an unbroken protuberance immediately below the chin, and on this protuberance Miss Prince had planted a wide cameo brooch, representing several naked figures, in attitudes more or less suggestive of classical beauty and Pagan propensities. Thus attired, the little lady

considered herself, as it were, *en tenue de campagne*, but the addition of a pair of green kid gloves brought her out forthwith in review order. She waved her gloved hand over the teapot, and told the doctor once more, and for the tenth time, that "she was glad to see him, and hoped he was a tea-drinker."

Now, Doctor Blair had been a traveller in his day, and before he joined the Dancing Hussars (which regiment he had also accompanied through many a long march in the glowing mornings of the tropics) had wandered, on his own account, over almost every part of the world in which tea is consumed. Had drunk it hot, weak, and unpalatable, in lonely posting-houses, on those dreary, monotonous, interminable journeys across Russia, that oppress the senses like a dream, and like a dream leave no salient points, no definite objects nor events by which to distinguish them when they are past. Had chipped off corners from a solid brick of it with the handle of his knife, and boiled them over a fire of camels' dung in the wastes of Tartary, to share the beverage with a sallow, flat-faced, beady-eyed comrade in a sheepskin garment, greasy, woolly, and lined throughout with vermin. Had even watered spoonfuls of it lying at the bottom of transparent porcelain cups, and pledged in the streaming draught no less dignified a host than a mandarin of the second class in the Celestial Empire.

Cold and strong in Crimean trenches, weak and scalding in Parisian *salons*, Blair had drunk tea wherever tea was made, but never, he declared, with such satisfaction as to-night; for was not Dot flitting gaily about him, bringing sugar, cream, muffins, cut bread-and-butter; and was he not prescribing to his favourite, and administering, surreptitious slices of the latter, plastered with jam a quarter of an inch thick?

"Your tea's as strong as brandy, Miss Prince," said the doctor approvingly, finishing his first cup at two gulps. "I'll no' say strong tea's as good as strong toddy, though; but little missie here is wearyin' for a sup, and I'll just ask ye for another dish before ye begin to a second brew."

"Now, Dot! I will not have you worry the doctor," interposed Mrs. George, already prepared, womanlike, to fall down and worship, because the visitor had been represented to her as a hero. "She's such a child for the gentlemen, doctor. I declare to you I can't keep her away from them; and papa spoils her so, he makes her worse. I'm sure, Dot, if you go on as you've begun, I don't know what you'll come to when

you're grown up. Don't let her tease you, doctor. Dot! do you hear me? Get off the gentleman's knee!"

But Dot knew better. Another prescription was in course of preparation, and the merry eyes laughed and sparkled while the remedy was stuffed into the rosy, expectant mouth. Then Dot put both her fat arms round her new friend's neck, and kissed him publicly, without the slightest affectation of diffidence or discomposure. "I like you, good Blair!" pronounced the young lady, as clearly as the process of mastication would permit. "I'm to be your wife, you know, instead of Uncle Phil's; ain't I, mamma? I like you, and I like Uncle Phil, and I like papa, and I like mamma, and I like Miss Prince, and I like Jane, but I don't like Mr. Multiple!"

Dot chanted the roll of her predilections in the sing-song with which children usually get over anything like repetition, as being less wearisome than simple recitative. It is a tone that forces itself on the least attentive circle, and Dot's audience were by this time listening to her open-mouthed.

"Mr. Multiple, child!" said her mother, laughing, in spite of herself, at Dot's eagerness. "What *can* have put Mr. Multiple in your head?"

Philip, too, looked up from his plate uneasily at the name. It sounded harsh in his ears. Perhaps he had learned, as people so circumstanced always do learn unwelcome facts, that the gentleman was a great deal at Bridlemere; and because he had resigned his treasure was no reason he should cease to be jealous of it.

"I saw Mr. Multiple to-day," replied Dot, nodding her head a great many times to imply certainty. "I saw him with good Blair on the staircase. Didn't I, good Blair?"

"The bairn was playin' herself on the stair," observed the doctor, thus appealed to, "whan the puir fallow that's gotten his heed brok' was brought ben to this gentlemon's room. I was feared the bit lassie might ha' gotten a fright, mem," he added apologetically to his little friend's mamma, "but she's a fine spirit for sic a young thing. It would be a gruesome bogle, I'm thinkin', that would daunton Miss Dot."

All this, like most indeed of the guest's conversation, was Hebrew to Mrs. Stoney; but she bowed, nevertheless, with great dignity, and, turning sharply on the child, repeated her question—

"What can you mean, you silly thing! about Mr. Multiple? I can't think when you have ever set eyes on him, even last winter, at Middlesworth; but how dare you say you saw him here to-day?"

"I *did* see him, mamma," answered the child gravely, colouring up very much, and nestling closer to "good Blair's" side. "He was helping another gentleman to carry the thing into Uncle Phil's room. The other gentleman lives next door. I often see him go out when I'm at tea. I don't like Mr. Multiple, mamma, because Jane said he was a bad man, when we met him in Hosier Street, near my own home; and I would have told him to go away to-day, but the thing was covered up, and had blood on it, and I was frightened, and hid my face in Jane's gown till good Blair shut the door."

The doctor looked from one to the other of the tea-drinkers with suspicion stamped on his shrewd Scotch face. George Stoney, though lately become the most silent of men, replied to the question conveyed by the expression of that hard-featured countenance. "When Dot speaks like that," said he, "you may be sure she is in earnest, and knows what she is about. The child never told a story in her life, and never forgot a face she had once seen. It's a peculiarity she inherits neither from her mamma nor me."

"It's impossible Mr. Multiple could have been here to-day," interposed Uncle Phil, disregarding Dot's reproachful looks. "I have reason to believe he is at this moment in the town of Middlesworth—and I wish I was there, too," added Philip, to himself, with a sigh.

"Do you know anything of this Mr. Multiple?" inquired the doctor carelessly, preparing at the same time another liberal mouthful of consolation for his pet. "Is he a gentleman or a professional man? or just a do-nothing, daundering and trafficking about?"

"He's a man with plenty of money," replied Philip, speaking very fast, while his colour rose; "and seems to do plenty of harm with it. I know nothing of him myself, and have heard but little from the Middlesworth people. That little is quite enough. I wish to Heaven he had never come within a hundred miles of the town!"

He hid his face in his teacup when he had finished, a little ashamed of his ebullition.

"And which o' the gentlemen do they call Mr. Multiple, my bonnie bird?" asked Doctor Blair, in coaxing tones, of the lady on his knee. "Was it the stout, wise-like man wi' a white cravat, an' a decent black coat like a meenister, or the set-up, saucy chap wi' a curly heed, and saft hands, and rings, and bonny-dies, an' 'havers,' that set a woman better than a mon?"

Constant practice and feminine affection had rendered

Dot a proficient in the Scottish tongue, of which language indeed she favoured Jane with many choice samples in the nursery; she understood her gigantic playfellow perfectly well, and replied without hesitation—

"It was Mr. Multiple that went backwards into Uncle Phil's room. I don't know the other gentleman, though I see him when I'm at tea, and Jane says he's a curmudgeon. But I do know Mr. Multiple, and I don't like him."

Doctor Blair looked thoughtful. He felt satisfied the child was sure of her man, and, indeed, Dot's positive, though simple manner, carried conviction along with it. He ran over the circumstances of the whole affair in his own mind, and it looked more mysterious now when thus reviewed than it had done under the immediate bustle created by the emergency. Two men bringing another in half dead—indeed, a good deal more than half to any but professional eyes—accounting for the sufferer's state by a tale that bore on the face of it marks of medical inconsistency and untruth; only remaining to see the patient well bestowed, but hurrying off before they could know for certain whether he would or would not recover from the blow, and one of them giving a false name before he left!

"John Francis," repeated the Scotchman, in indignant murmurs to himself. "John Francis, indeed; Paveelion Hotel, Folkestone. There's a wise-like address for a decent mon! Ye thought ye'd be like the tailor lad wha cuttit aff his ain shanks wi' his ain shears, an' had gotten a fule in yon surgeon. Bide you a wee, Maister John Francis, or Multiple, or whatever they call ye. Andry Blair 'll be upsides wi' ye, for all that's come and gane yet. An' ye're kenspeckle eneugh, my mon. Even the bairnie here was dooms sure o' ye at the very onset. Dinna *you* think I'm like to forget ye; and once your heed's under my belt, I'll wring it aff for ye, sure as my name's Blair!"

But it was not the doctor's practice to wear his thoughts on his sleeve, and he entertained, moreover, certain old-fashioned notions as to the stringent requirements of good breeding. He always admitted, despite his ungainly exterior, that he was rather a ladies' man, and he busied himself now to hand the teacups, carry the kettle, and cut more bread and butter, of which seductive food he and Dot had between them consumed an inordinate quantity, with an alacrity that won him golden opinions from his landlady.

Miss Prince thought she had never before met one of the opposite sex who combined, as she expressed it, such delicate attentions with such a manly deportment. Lord Waywarden

had hitherto constituted her ideal of what a gentleman should be; but Lord Waywarden, though doubtless a most agreeable person, never could keep awake to talk to her for more than five minutes at a time. Neither was his lordship's conversation, she must allow, so improving as the doctor's, nor his accent so impressive and remarkable. Miss Prince was quite gratified, when she came to think of it, that the poor young man, whose identity she little suspected, had been brought in to recover consciousness beneath her roof.

The teapot had to be refilled more than once, and under its genial influence the ladies' tongues were loosened, and they discoursed volubly on their own and their neighbours affairs. Wine is, no doubt, an incentive to conversation; but I think for the encouragement of that kind of talk which attributes startling motives to common actions; which exchanges information, remarkable alike for its imprudence and its improbability; which is understood, in short, by the generic term, gossip, the bottle is far behind the teapot.

Miss Prince's third cup led her insensibly back to the spacious halls and lofty chambers of Tollesdale. She impressed on her guest, at great length, the height of the hall the proportions and furniture (different in each) of the rooms on the ground-floor, the number and value of the pictures, the width of the staircase, and the length of the conservatory. Thence, by an easy transition, diverging into an eulogy of his lordship's character, his hospitality, his magnificence, his county influence, and the affability of his manners. "Lady Waywarden, too," continued Miss Prince, warming to the subject as she sipped her tea, "is a most elegant person. She was the Court beauty, Doctor Blair; quite the Court beauty of her day, when you, sir, must have been a boy at school, and I myself was"—(here her conscience, admonished by a sparkle of mirth in Mrs. George's eyes, gave her a vigorous nudge)—"well, when I was a good deal younger than I am now. She never had his lordship's angelic temper, sir, far from it; but her complexion was like a girl's of eighteen, and her handwriting copper-plate. I do assure you, positive copper-plate. You must have observed, doctor, how a fine skin runs in families. My own poor mother was called the White Rose of Tiverton, and Isabella here, Mrs. Stoney, has three sisters—haven't you, dear?—with velvet skins like your own. It's no wonder Lady Julia should be beautiful. Lady Julia Treadwell, doctor, that's their only daughter and my pupil. I think my favourite pupil, after you, Isabella dear. A most engaging young lady, Doctor Blair. Such a

figure! such spirits! such talents! The best dancer, so they said, yet turned out by the Entrechats *père et fils*, and as kind a heart as ever beat in a pure and virgin bosom!"

Here Miss Prince blushed a little, coughed, and paused, being out of breath.

The doctor thought he was expected to say something, so he hitched Dot on the other knee, and blurted out—

"It's a wonder she's no' got married yet!"

Miss Prince nodded her head a great many times, thereby bespeaking the attention of her audience, especially Mrs. George, ere she observed sagaciously—

"Quite a gentleman's remark, I'm sure, and more to the purpose than you might have supposed. I think there is no doubt she *is* going to be married, and that almost immediately, though as yet it is to be kept a profound secret."

Mrs. George half rose from her chair at the news.

"Oh! I *am* so glad!" she exclaimed, as though the intelligence imparted some keen and inexplicable joy; and that Lady Julia's coverture could signify one toss of a halfpenny to *her*. Even Dot looked up delighted. Miss Prince herself was vibrating all over with suppressed importance and satisfaction. What is there in the matrimonial yoke that its imposition on a fresh bondsman should afford such universal contentment to the whole of the gentler sex? It cannot be the unworthy consideration that another competitor is promoted out of the ranks; for grandmamma on crutches, who has long withdrawn from the game, and Miss Saucebox there in short frocks, who has not yet become a player, are equally sincere in their congratulations. Everybody knows that at a wedding the church is filled with women who have no concern, directly or indirectly, with the principal performers. I don't think I ever heard of a man attending this sacred ordinance unless compelled to do so, and the compulsion, by the way, is invariably under female pressure. Is it then unmixed joy, I say, at a sister's triumph, or gratitude for her deliverance from the perils of spinsterhood, or a fine liberal satisfaction in the victory of the good cause? I am inclined to repudiate all these explanations, and to believe that, like the Ministerial party in the House of Commons, the whole female sex exult, as an abstract question of principle, in the winning of every additional unit to the side of the Government.

"I'm afraid I am very indiscreet," resumed Miss Prince, with a smile at the doctor; "but among friends I may be confident it will go no further. My sweet pupil, as I am

informed, is about to bestow her hand on a very old acquaintance, and a very near neighbour, and a very handsome young gentleman. Mr. Stoney, *you* must know whom I mean!"

Mr. Stoney, thus adjured, woke up from a brown study, and guessed Sir Abraham Evergreen, a county baronet of seventy, who had buried two wives already, and lived at least forty miles from Tollesdale, as the crow flies. His suggestion was coughed down at once.

"It is a most suitable match," continued the tea-maker, with a dignified wave of the unoccupied hand in its green kid glove. "Suitable in years, connections, personal appearance, expectations, really in every respect, and I am heartily glad of it. What do you think, my dear Isabella? What do you think of young Mr. Brooke, of Bridlemere?"

Philip looked up interested enough now, though for an instant something swept across his face like pain. His sister-in-law saw it, though no one else did, and she repeated Miss Prince's words in such a tone of wonder as startled that lady again at score.

"Not the eldest Mr. Brooke; not the young squire as they call him, who was never much of a favourite with my sweet girl; but the second son, Mr. Walter. Such a handsome young man! very dashing, very accomplished! They will, indeed, be a most elegant couple!"

"All this is vary inter—esting," observed the doctor, fidgeting on his chair, now that he had finished his tea, and beginning to feel it was time to go and look after his patient. "An' I'm thinkin' if the leddy was *your* scholar, mem, she'll be as guid as she's bonny. Are ye wantin' doun, little missie? Ye'll excuse my takin' leave of the company for the present, Miss Prince. I've a bit joiner's wark, ye ken, that will noo want shuperveesion. Maybe, I'll hae to pit in a tack, just to keep the bung in the bar'l yet. I've had a vary pleesan' crack, an' a most deleeshus tea, and so I'll just tak' a French leave o' ye, wi' a *bong swore, la compagnie!*"

Mollified, however, by the entreaties of all parties—for all, except perhaps Philip, were bursting with curiosity—the doctor promised to look in later, with news of his patient, pending which return Miss Prince flourished the teapot once again, for a little more gossip, and another cup of her favourite beverage.

"Have I astonished you enough, my dears?" said she, looking round triumphantly, "or shall I tell you another piece of news about the old county in which we have all passed so many happy days? Ah! I have got a budget of marriages

for you when once I begin. What should you say if Mr. Walter Brooke were not the only one of his family about to enter the holy state?"

Philip turned very pale, but answered never a word.

"Say!" exclaimed Mrs. George, advancing boldly to the rescue, though fearful of what was coming next. "Why, that it was extremely improbable, unless you had it on the very best authority. Rumour, we used to learn at school, has a hundred tongues. When the rumour is concerning marriages, I think a hundred thousand would be nearer the mark."

"Well, my dear," admitted Miss Prince, "I'll allow I'm not so certain of this wedding as the other. I've often been surprised, though, that Miss Brooke hasn't married years ago. With her beauty, and her sweet temper, and her expectations from her uncle, I don't know any young lady less entitled to remain in a state of single blessedness. Don't you think so, Mr. Philip? You know her, I believe, better than any of the other townspeople in Middlesworth."

Philip forced himself to answer with a brave fixed face—

"I had the pleasure of knowing Miss Brooke, and seeing her very often in her own family. She is too good for any man, were he the best and noblest in the land. I trust she will be happy with him. Who—who did you say it was, Miss Prince?"

His lips were dry and white while he asked. He had not before realised the amount of hope that lay stifled, but still existent in his heart, till these last tidings came to sear out every trace of his folly, as with a hot iron. It was a friend's hand, too, that thus applied the cautery. A gentle, kindly hand that would not have given him a moment's suffering for a kingdom, yet it seared him deep, steady, unshrinking and pitiless, because unconscious of his pain.

"That's what I always thought, Mr. Philip," exclaimed Miss Prince exultingly. "From the time I first set eyes on her, at our archery meeting, when Lady Waywarden said it was dull, and damp, and there should never be another at Tollesdale—and my lady kept her word, too, for that matter—I always thought if I'd been a man, that was the girl I should have chosen for my wife. She mightn't have had Lady Julia's sparkle and spirits, and what I call perfect finish of company manners—for, to be sure, she hadn't the same advantages of education; but to see her come into a room, with her beautiful head up, and her noble quiet walk, she was more like a queen than a simple English lady; and when

she turned those deep dark eyes upon me, with a gentle, sorrowful look in them, like a deer's, why I used to feel as if I could burst out crying, and hug her round the neck, if she hadn't been so tall. Couldn't *you*, Mr. Philip?"

If he hadn't been a man, he could have burst out crying now; and as for hugging, why, not to mention Miss Brooke, he could have hugged the little tea-maker herself, and welcome, for the way in which she spoke of his heart's delight. It was torture, no doubt, but there was, nevertheless, a wild, maddening thrill of ecstasy in the very pain.

You see he had not even heard the dear name spoken for so long. He was like a man who thinks by abstaining from water to cure the fever of thirst. No wonder the ripple of the stream was sweeter than music in his ears. I have known men, and women too, declare they would rather hear a beloved object maligned than not mentioned at all, and it is doubtless pleasant to defend the absent, who are never really absent from our thoughts. How then can we but feel kindly towards the impartial observer (of its own sex, of course), who betrays a tendency to fall down and grovel in the dust before our idol, as we do ourselves?

"You were a great favourite of hers, Miss Prince, I know," said Philip warmly. "I have often heard her speak about you, and you know how truthful and sincere she was. You—you didn't hear anything for certain, Miss Prince, I think you said?"

He had put his lips to the pleasant cup now, he couldn't resist, and the bitter drop, as usual, was not far off.

"Not for certain, exactly," replied Miss Prince; "but still I think, between you and me, Mr. Philip, on the very best authority. You see, I occasionally receive a letter from Lady Waywarden's maid—her *confidential* maid, you understand—a most respectable person, whom, indeed, when I quitted Tollesdale, I requested to inform me at stated intervals of the welfare of the family. Her ladyship, you know, is much engaged, and has little time to spare for mere private letter-writing, and Lady Julia is apt to forget these duties till the post has gone out, and it is too late. Well, it was only this morning I heard from Elise of her young lady's approaching marriage to Mr. Brooke; and in the same letter she tells me that there seems every chance of a double wedding at Bridlemere, for a gentleman, a great friend of Mr. Walter, is never out of the house now; and the squire's groom told my lord's second coachman that the servants understood it was all regularly arranged, and as soon as his master got a little

better, Miss Helen and the visitor were to make a match of it. A very rich gentleman, Elise says, and a very handsome, free-handed one. She does not consider Miss Brooke looks well; but attributes it to the weather, and thinks matrimony a cure for all disorders. It may, or may not, be a sovereign remedy," concluded Miss Prince demurely, pushing her cup away and folding her gloved hands in her lap. "It's impossible for me to give an opinion, for I've never tried it."

"The name—the name, my dear!" urged Mrs. George; thinking that it would be more merciful to put Philip out of his pain at once. "You keep us all in suspense, while you withhold the only part of your news that can enable us to judge whether this gentleman is an eligible match for our lovely neighbour, Miss Brooke, of Bridlemere."

"It's very odd," returned Miss Prince, "the name had quite escaped me, and I never recalled it till that child mentioned it just now. The fortunate gentleman is a Mr. Multiple. From London, I understand; a partner I imagine in some great banking-house. Very suitable in point of years, and devotedly attached to the lady. It is a most desirable match!"

Philip sat quietly to be operated on. Something told him this was coming all along. He had learned, surely enough, though I cannot tell by what means, how a person of that name, young, wealthy, fashionable and handsome, had become a frequent visitor in the house which contained his treasure. Something had often warned him that this must be the end; and now, why was it so painful, since he had anticipated it long ago? Probably, because, however much Hope may be cut over and trodden down, she is never utterly destroyed until grubbed up by the roots. He bore the knife, though, resolutely and without flinching. When the surgeon runs his instrument into a flesh wound to keep it open, lest it heal too rapidly, we turn our faces to the wall, and set our muscles, and nerve ourselves against the well-meant infliction; so, when our hearts are probed in careless gaiety by dear, unconscious friends, we summon all our pride and all our endurance, and steel ourselves to bear, and never wince nor quiver while the iron seems to enter into our souls. Philip Stoney was but a ruined brewer after all; yet he was capable of self-devotion and self-sacrifice, such as we ascribe, on somewhat slender grounds, to the era of chivalry; and possessed, moreover, that leavening of romance which lies deep in the characters of most Englishmen, and is so seldom permitted to appear on the surface.

Had he known Multiple to be a good man and true, I

believe he could have merged his selfish feelings, and forgotten his own disappointment in Helen's welfare. I believe he could have borne to see her happy with another, and been even thankful for her sake; but what he could *not* bear was, that she, his treasure, his ideal, and his pride, should knowingly throw herself away on a man whom, if she had loved, she would not have been the Helen he adored.

Mrs. George read his thoughts, and was sorry for him; more, she interposed to save him further torture, by rising from the tea-table, and so promoting a general break-up. Her good intentions were, however, anticipated by the return of Doctor Blair, who stood like an apparition in the doorway, with an expression of grim contentment on his remarkable features. Dot jumped up incontinently from under the table, and seized his bony hand to pull him in.

"What news of the patient?" was inquired, in chorus, by all the tea-drinkers; Miss Prince adding, on her own account—

"I am sure there is hope, doctor, by the favourable expression of your face!"

Blair sat down, and shook his head gravely.

"There's a nurse at wark, yonder," said he, "to beat the whole College o' Surgeons all to rubbish, and they call her Dame Nature. The lad was sensible a while syne. He's a wise-like lad, yon, and gotten a fore-arm like a smith's! His heed maun be as hard as whinstane; but ye'll obsairve that whan Dame Nature kens the brain is worth the trouble o' presairvin', she'll no' forget to hap it up in a gey stout box. I'd be loth to 'trephine' the lad, whilk the ignorant tairm 'trepannin,' for he's maist oot o' danger the noo. A's no' tint that's in hazard, ye ken, or Miss Dot here would gar us greet baith sides our mouths ilka day in the week. Na, na; I'll no' 'trephine' the lad, 'gin he'll pull through as he stands."

"Do you consider him out of danger?" asked two or three voices simultaneously, in the weak expectation that any doctor would answer such a question point-blank.

"I'm no' by ony means oot o' danger mysel'!" replied Blair gallantly, "with twa such braw leddies at my side, no' to speak o' little missie here on my knee. But the lad's progressin', progressin' slowly, but favourably. He wandered a wee thing at the first, whan he cam' round; and he's been anxious syne, just aff an' on, an' awfu' taken up aboot a doag. He canna rest for thinkin' aboot his doag, puir fallow; an' I was just forced to humour him and tell him we would hae the beastie advairtis'd."

"I hope you will keep your word," said Philip. "He'll not get well half so fast if he's lost anything he sets his heart on; and your skill, doctor, will not get half the credit of his cure."

"Hoot, fye!" replied Blair. "There's sma' skeel in mending siccan a clout in the pan as yon! I'm no' saying but what he's been corrackly treated, though it's not possible to go wrong in cases like these wi' a healthy subjeck. I promised him, natheless, Mr. Stoney, just to ease his mind; an' noo I'll see an' comb oot a bit adverteesement, just to keep touch, ye ken."

Doctor Blair sat down accordingly, at the instance of his two hostesses, both of whom were naturally bursting with curiosity, and proceeded to write out an advertisement for the next day's *Times*, couched in the following words:—

"LOST, in the immediate neighbourhood of Short Street, Strand, between the hours of twelve and two o'clock, yesterday, a rough black and grey Terrier, of the famous Castle Cropperton breed. Whoever shall bring the same to the barman of the Dog and Donkey Tavern, Strand, will receive a reward. The terrier is perfectly domesticated, and answers to the name of 'Tatters.'"

"Tatters!" exclaimed everybody in a breath, as the doctor, not without pride, read out this choice and discreet composition. "Tatters!" and they looked at each other in utter bewilderment and surprise.

"Ay, Tatters!" repeated the doctor, with strong displeasure. "Whatna like name's yon for a doag? If they called him Wallace, now, or Mungo, or even Dawvid, there might be some sense in them. But Tatters! It's no' wise-like!"

"And this is a young man, you say?" interrupted Philip eagerly. "A man of my age or less, and a little taller, with brown hair and ruddy face, and strong active figure?"

"I'll no' say much for the colour in his face," answered the doctor. "Ye ken depletion works as quick most as a lick o' white paint; but he's a braw lad, like yersel', mon, wi' a bonny curl in his locks, and a pair of shouthers that might ha' served Saumson Agonistes. I'm thinkin' this lad's no' been that far from the Pheelistins himsel'."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Philip. "It *must* be Jack Brooke! What can have happened? How came he here? Surely there is nothing wrong at Bridlemere? I'll go and see him this instant!"

"You'll *no'!*" replied the doctor, laying his strong bony hand on the young man's shoulder, and holding him by its pressure forcibly down in his chair. "He's takin' a sleep, and whan he waukens the morn, we'll ken whether he'll live

or dee. See an' help to redd up the tea-things, mon. There's Miss Prince lockin' the cookies in the press. Whan ye're sorted, mem," added the doctor to his landlady gallantly, "I'll be happy to tak' a hand at the cartes wi' ye; an' I'll wager a bawbee with Miss Dot that she canna keep still for mair than five consackutive meenits on the clock!"

CHAPTER XXVI

HIGH PRESSURE

WHEN Pounder had disposed of the wounded man in his next-door neighbour's house, and found himself deserted by his partner at the earliest opportunity, it may be supposed that he reviewed the doings of that day with feelings of considerable apprehension and disgust. It seemed an ugly business enough, whichever way he looked at it. Should the sufferer die, which was by no means improbable, there existed, he well knew, a form of justice to be observed, called an inquest; and even when verdicts are satisfactory, jurymen often make unpleasant remarks on facts of which they disapprove, as revealed by the evidence. Then, at the best, supposing the coroner and all believed the story of the fit and the fall against the top step in the passage, these twelve intelligent Englishmen would probably demand a view of the premises; and what awkward questions might not be put to him, Pounder, as to his profession, means of livelihood, general character, and antecedents? which conscience reminded him would not bear examination. It was hardly possible but that much must transpire, which it was his interest and hourly endeavour to keep a secret. Again, suppose the surgeon's evidence repudiated the notion of a fit (and the money-lender, a quick-sighted man enough, remembered the expression of Blair's countenance when that affliction was suggested as the cause for the accident). Suppose, on cross-examination, it should turn out that Multiple had been present in the house, though he affirmed to Blair he had only been passing the door. Suppose the workmen in the adjoining building should have heard or seen something of the scuffle, two against one; and suppose the jury should return a verdict of—— Oh! that was impossible! absurd! He would not allow himself to think of it. The man would be sure to recover. People did not die of a crack on the head. This fellow, too, was as tough as a prize-fighter; he could not but allow that, when his partner came to help him, he was getting the worst of it; and

he was no chicken, he knew—had been one of the best men in London, either with or without the gloves, at five-and-thirty; and used to think he could wrestle a bit even later in life than that! No—of course he wouldn't die; but what then? Except as a hanging matter, his recovery would be almost as prejudicial to them as his death. It would blow the whole connection to the devil!

Here was a young man, an eldest son, with whose family they had done business, whose antecedents and position were perfectly well-known to them, half killed in their own office, under broad daylight, by the acting partner himself (for of course he, Pounder, must bear all the blame), in a disgraceful *fracas* about a bill. Why, the *Times* would take it up, and the *Morning Post*, and all the Sunday papers, not excepting *Bell's Life*, which would devote a leading article to the affair, as being somewhat in its own line. What would be the consequence? Young spendthrifts would avoid a den of usury in which they were subjected to ill-usage besides exposure; fresh paper would cease to float into their strong boxes; old customers would extricate themselves at any sacrifice from their clutches; and all the brisk trade they had been doing would be diverted at once into the jaws of Haman.

It was no pleasure having a garden at Balham, even a fortnight earlier in its vegetation than last year, while involved in such a labyrinth of difficulties as these; and Pounder confessed to himself, for once, that he was beat, and that it would take a wiser head than his to decide what should be done. He seldom consulted Multiple on matters of business, for that gentleman usually so arranged as that his partner's share of responsibility should only consist in seeing his own instructions carried out. There was a stringent general order, too, against bringing Short Street, under any circumstances, to Mayfair; in other words, Pounder was expressly forbidden to visit Multiple at his lodgings, near Piccadilly.

In an emergency like the present, however, the former decided that any breach of established discipline was permissible, and calling a cab, he proceeded westward to take counsel of his partner, in a high state of perturbation and dismay. From sheer habit he carried the umbrella in his hand that dealt the final blow. Its horn handle had been actually splintered by the force applied. Pounder's heart failed him when he observed a single hair from Jack's brown head adhering to the weapon, and while he plucked it out, a blush of honest shame crimsoned his broad face at the remembrance of the scuffle and its results.

The money-lender's predilections were all in favour of a fair stand-up fight, and the bare notion of foul play was extremely distasteful to his sympathies, natural and acquired. Till he married and settled at Balham, he had been what is termed a sporting man about London, frequenting sets-to, matches against time, pigeon-shootings, dog-fights, and such congenial conflicts, professing one and all to be open and above-board tests of endurance, strength, and skill. Their theory, at least, admitted nothing in the shape of treachery, or unequal odds; and while their honesty was of a very questionable kind, its limits, though widely extended, were never avowedly over-stepped.

Pounder was better adapted for an old-fashioned outlaw than a modern swindler, although in his case, as in many others, education and his partner's example had done much to engraft a fair stock of cunning and hypocrisy on his original brute strength and rough, resolute nature. He was thoroughly discomfited now, and feared that he could not, as usual, shake off his business recollections with the first shriek of the railway-engine. Even at Balham he felt too surely he must be haunted by the doings of the day: the recollection of his defeat; the interference of his partner; above all the labyrinth of perplexity in which the whole affair was involved.

While his cab-horse slipped and scrambled, and stumbled up the Haymarket, he reflected that nothing but Multiple's extraordinary cunning and wealth of resources in emergency could save them from shipwreck in the present crisis.

"He's soft," thought Pounder, who hated him heartily enough, "and selfish and luxurious, I know. I don't even believe that he has got even a grain of pluck in him, when he's fairly tackled; but his headpiece is a good one I must allow. The best I ever came across, or he'd had it broke many a time by now. That headpiece will pull us through once more, I'll answer for it. I shall go easier down to dinner when I've had my instructions, and see my way a little clear out of this infernal mess!"

Prepared to be consoled, he jumped out and rang the bell. "Was Mr. Multiple at home? He must see him directly, on business of importance."

The servant knew Pounder by sight perfectly well. "He was very sorry Mr. Multiple was not at home—had gone out early—expected him back every minute. Sure to come in at dressing-time. Would Mr. Pounder step in and wait?"

Here was another difficulty. Pounder saw nothing for it but to comply with the valet's suggestion, and stepped in accordingly. He might have waited all day, had his patience lasted, for Multiple was a score of miles out of town by this time, meditating his decisive stroke as he sat solitary in a first-class carriage, steaming down to Bridlemere.

The moment had arrived to play his last card without compunction; for if the game was not won and the stakes landed before Jack Brooke's hard head recovered its consciousness, why the whole match must be lost, irretrievably, once for all. He rather liked the excuse for final measures; rather enjoyed the prospect of putting the strong, painful, irresistible pressure on that haughty girl with her dark eyes, whose image haunted and goaded him like a curse; anticipated with morbid pleasure the probable scene, and vowed to have amends for the anxieties and humiliations he chose to persuade himself she had made him undergo.

Perhaps it is the pace at which we speed, suggestive in itself of abnormal energy and power, and comparative ubiquity, that makes things appear feasible when we travel by railway, though we considered them perfectly impossible before we took our tickets, and shall find them extremely difficult to accomplish when we have arrived. It has never been my good fortune to cleave the skies like Dædalus, or Mr. Glaisher, in a balloon; nor am I likely to do so, unless *quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat*; but I have no doubt that every man begins to feel a hero at an elevation of a thousand feet, and I fancy that for consciousness of capability, and a general conviction of superiority to his kind, as the horseman is to the pedestrian, so is the railway traveller to the horseman, and the aëronaut to the railway traveller, though the last fly through space at the rate of sixty miles an hour, on the wings of the Liverpool express.

Multiple's brain was seldom idle, but it did not usually work so fast as now, while he traversed the wide green pastures, grown lately so familiar, that told him he was approaching Middlesworth station. He felt none of the diffidence, none of the misgivings, none of the conflict of hopes and fears, half-cherished, half-repressed, that chequer the anticipations of a true lover in his meeting with her whom he has taught himself to esteem fairer, and wiser, and better, and harder to win than all the other daughters of Eve. He neither trembled when he thought of his princess, nor did his heart thrill and his cheek burn to feel that every minute and every mile brought him closer to her presence; that nothing

but the near horizon now divided him from the palace in which she lived; that yonder line of wooded hills was within the range of her vision as of his; that the very breeze which stirred the clump of leafless poplars at the station where he gave up his ticket would but dally with that half-dozen of elms, a mile off on the height, ere it passed on to whisper amongst the evergreens in Helen's garden, under her windows at Bridlemere. These are lovers' fancies, fond, foolish, yet engrossing for the time. Multiple was no fond, foolish lover, but a wooer—fierce, resolute, and not to be denied.

While the train slackened speed to glide into Middlesworth station, he clenched both his hands tight, till the costly rings he wore printed marks in his soft white fingers, smiling with the smile of one who has taken a prey for which he feels no pity, and got an enemy at a disadvantage to whom he will extend no grace.

Miss Brooke's walk was over just about the time Mr. Multiple's train stopped at its last station but one. Helen had paid her usual visit to Dame Batters, whose remarks were more inconsequent, as her rheumatism seemed more troublesome, than common. The girl entered her own garden with drooping head and slow, listless step. Somebody had compared her to a lily once, in Philip Stoney's hearing. It was long ago. She knew exactly how long, and could have named the very day of the month on which this exceedingly trite simile was proclaimed. She also remembered how a young man in company had clandestinely gathered one of those spotless flowers soon after, and, too shy to wear it in his buttonhole, had twirled it about between his fingers till the stalk broke. She had not forgotten how he picked up the head and put it away somewhere—probably in his pocket—with great care and secrecy, believing himself unobserved. And so he was by all but her. She was like a lily still; but a poor, faded lily now—drooping, forlorn, and dejected; no longer the priestess of the garden and the pride of the summer's day.

She felt oppressed by one of those strange, dim forewarnings of evil to which we are subject all our lives, but especially in the sensitive season of youth. Forewarnings, that overshadow us with no kind of reason, and arise from no phantom revelations of the future, but from the certain influence of the past. Medically speaking—not romantically—they are apt to originate in affections of the heart. Derangement of the liver, I suspect, and disorder of the stomach will also create these depressing sensations; but though often the effect of bodily ailment, a long course of mental anxiety is sure to produce

them in their most distressing form. If any particular misfortune happens to us after one of these morbid attacks, we hold up our hands and talk vaguely about mysterious affinities, and the wonderful presentiments of the soul. If, as is usually the case, nothing out of the common way takes place, we forget all about them directly ; change of scene, or diet, or society, has drawn them from our minds.

Helen felt low and nervous when she went to dress. Sitting down before her glass, and looking on the lovely image it reflected, her thoughts flowed back in the contemplation of her own face, to him for whose sake alone she prized the beauty which she could not but be aware she possessed. It was sad, it was humiliating, yet it was not entirely displeasing, to feel how everything now reminded her of *him* ; and when she considered that soon it would be a crime to think of him at all, she felt justified in indemnifying herself by present rebellion for the loyalty that must never again be shaken after the fatal day on which she had passed her word.

The maid, who had been with her young mistress in the nursery, and who was an execrable hairdresser, pulled, and parted, and brushed out Helen's long locks, chattering volubly the while, with that happy insensibility to the low spirits of others enjoyed by so many of her class. She was especially fluent to-night on Mr. John's abrupt departure, an occurrence sufficiently unprecedented to have occasioned many surmises below-stairs, and condoled with Helen on the probability of her sitting down alone, in the event of his not returning to dinner.

No lady's-maid—even if she lived in a booking-office—would be likely to have the remotest idea of the time at which any train in the twenty-four hours was due at a station ; and though people were continually arriving at Bridlemere by this method of transit, Helen's attendant entertained no more distinct notions of when, or how, or why they got to Middlesworth, than if she had resided in another kingdom, instead of the adjoining parish.

When, therefore, the grinding of wheels was heard outside, followed by an alarming peal at the door-bell, it never occurred to her that this was the most probable hour at which the young squire would return by the quick afternoon train in time for dinner, having been up to London for the day.

She dropped one of Helen's long black tresses, and nearly swallowed a great two-legged hairpin that she held between her teeth.

"Whoever can have arrived at this time of night?"

exclaimed the handmaiden, it being a quarter-past seven p.m. "Master Walter isn't expected back from the barracks, for his things isn't laid out, nor the sheets on his bed, I know. Lor! Miss Helen, what *can* have happened? It give me quite a turn, it did, to hear that bell a-ringing so, when it will be as dark outside in half an hour as a wolf's mouth."

"You can go and see, if you like," said Helen listlessly; "tell them to put off dinner till I ring, and mind papa's soup is ready for him at eight o'clock. I'll take it in when I leave the dining-room. Run and see at once; I'll finish my hair myself."

Helen was too glad to be let alone, even by her maid, and having expected all day that Jack would return to dinner, to which meal, indeed, she would not have sat down by herself, was in no way startled by the noisy arrival.

Soon the handmaiden returned, breathless, and clasping her side, but with the beaming face of one who bears tidings that cannot but be welcome—

"Oh, Miss Helen!" she exclaimed, "only think! It's Mr. Multiple! We've ordered his things to Master Walter's room, and he've asked me himself—and him looking so stout and well, to be sure—to tell Miss Brooke, with his compliments, that he hoped he might jine of her at dinner, and pay his respects to the squire afterwards; and, oh, Miss Helen! I'm sure I'd better get out your pink tulle, and put flowers in your hair now."

Helen, opposite the glass, saw her own face fall, and its expression startled her. It reminded her of a girl taken along Piccadilly by a policeman one day when she was riding with Uncle Archie. In a few seconds she thought she had grown like that poor, desperate, hardened girl. She smiled, nevertheless, scornfully and bitterly at the maid's suggestion of putting flowers in her hair, and, rising at once, proceeded hastily with her toilet, that she might not keep her future lord waiting for dinner. Nevertheless, when she had almost finished dressing, and her maid was jerking the indispensable three drops of scent into a laced handkerchief that lay ready by her gloves, she did not disdain to put on two more rings and an additional bracelet in honour of her unexpected guest. Because she hated the man, was that a reason she should not look her best, even in his eyes? As it is the soldier's pride and point of honour to preserve his steel untarnished, though shoes be worn and uniform in rags, the ammunition spent, the bread not come up, flanks threatened, and retreat cut off, so woman keeps her beauty bright and polished, even in the last

extremity: and, though she must needs surrender it to the bitterest enemy, takes care to give it up without a speck to dim its lustre or detract from the value of his prize.

While the servants were in the room—and you may be sure that on such an occasion they did not in anyway diminish the curiosity and surveillance habitually exercised by these familiars—the conversation was carried on pleasantly and good-humouredly enough. General topics, of a self-evident nature—such as the lateness of the spring, the uncertainty of the weather, the advantage of railways, and the health of the family—formed its basis, just as they did for you and your bride when you dined *tête-à-tête* the first day of your honeymoon, and might be supposed to have a few interests in common which would bear considerable discussion; or, as they did that wretched evening, when you came down in your black dress to sit at the accustomed table, when the routine of daily life—interrupted while a certain room was darkened, and a certain awful Presence pervaded the house of mourning—had subsided into its usual channel, the servants handing successive dishes in established order, and the sad hearts present, vainly affecting to interest themselves in ordinary topics, because the one engrossing subject that pervaded them was too sorrowful and too sacred to reveal.

The dinner, as it seemed to Helen, was protracted to an unusual length, and yet much too soon over at last. Not that she herself did justice to its cheer, although Multiple, who was always a methodical person at dinner-time, and suffered nothing to interfere with his material pleasures, went very systematically through the bill of fare, and finished off with a glass of old port, after cheese. When the dessert was put on the table, Miss Brooke rose, and muttering something about "papa's soup," excused herself from further attendance, on the plea that she always sat with the squire for half an hour before he went to bed; so she sailed out of the room more upright than usual, not, however, till Multiple, opening the door gallantly, with a bow and a flourish, chilled her blood by whispering that he "had seen the squire himself for five minutes before dinner, who was prepared for everything, and approved highly of the measure!"

After this parting shaft, he rang the bell, ordered more coals, and sat down to his claret with an appearance of complete confidence and contentment.

It was Helen's last chance. While she took her father's soup into the library, she meditated for an instant some such appeal as a daughter has a right, and, indeed, an obligation,

to make. Her heart swelled when she thought of the fine, tall, handsome man she used to run to with all her foolish fears and troubles as a child; of the good-humoured voice that made light of her difficulties; and the strong arm that tossed her little form to his shoulder—whence she looked down on the world, reassured, triumphant, and consoled. He would come to her rescue to-day, as he came when the brindled cow kept her prisoner in the orchard, or when her governess punished her unjustly for one of brother Walter's misdeeds. It was only to go to dear papa, jump on his knee, make a clean breast of it, and everything was put right. Alas! dear papa had neither body nor mind now for helping her over a hard word to spell, or a high stile to climb. She remembered what the doctors said, that the slightest agitation might be fatal, and resolved that if this man had so far forgotten his promise as to have broached the hated subject, and really obtained the squire's consent, why, the sacrifice must be completed. For her father's sake, and Walter's, she would endure without complaint—but it was base, ungentlemanlike, dishonourable of Mr. Multiple—and this man was to be her husband! The interview between father and daughter was of no long duration, and productive of no disturbance, at least to the former. Helen entered the drawing-room with a flush on her brow, and a flash in her eye, to meet her future lord. He had hurried, he had mistrusted her, he had neither honour, nor generosity, nor common delicacy. It was horrible to hate him, but it was worse still to despise.

He was already settled in an arm-chair before the fire. Brilliant in colour, faultless in attire, comely, lusty, and flushed with wine, his very attitude and bearing seemed suggestive of satisfaction and confidence in himself. He did not even rise when Miss Brooke came in, but put out his hand as she passed with a familiar gesture, as though inviting her to sit on his knee. She stood over against him on the hearth-rug, very angry—yes, I must admit that the gentle, good-tempered Helen was very angry, though she strove to speak calmly and without raising her voice.

"Is this generous, Mr. Multiple?" said she. "Is it fair or honourable, or even the common courtesy of a gentleman? You have no right to force yourself upon me when I'm alone like this—papa so ill, and my brothers both away. It's infamous, Mr. Multiple—it's a shame!—it's too bad!"

"You look very handsome when you're cross," he answered, with an insulting affectation of carelessness. "All you dark women do. But I wouldn't advise you to give me too much

of this sort of thing when we're married, Helen. I'm a good-tempered fellow enough, but I don't like curry for dinner every day. This, I suppose, is only a lovers' quarrel, and you mean it to end in a lovers' make-up. Well, I'm agreeable; kiss-and-be-friends is a very pretty game for a winter's evening — *bien entendu* — when the two players are quite alone!"

How she wished for brother Jack's arms and shoulders now—nay, for brother Walter's much-admired ivory-handled sword. I believe that in either case something very like manslaughter would have been the result. It was little use, however, clenching those pale, slender fingers, and the nearest weapon of offence was only a sandalwood paper-cutter after all. What would somebody else say (somebody whose every tone, when he spoke to her, on the merest trifle, was between a prayer and a caress), if he could see her now? The thought softened her, and she continued pleading more mildly, with a little tremble in her voice that betokened tears not very far off.

"At least, you should have given me time—you had my promise, and surely that ought to have been enough. When you know us better, Mr. Multiple," she added, forgetting from its familiarity the very chain that galled her to the quick, "you will not require to be told that the word of the Brookes is as good and better than their bond."

"I would not give much for the one or the other from some members of your family, Helen," he retorted brutally. "I know quite enough about their bonds, and the only word I mean to test is yours. Come, you've ridden the high horse quite long enough. I think it's time for me to assume some of the authority of—of a husband, Helen—that's what I mean to be."

He thought she was cowed by his unconcealed disregard for her feelings, and that she only wanted "taking hold of," as he called it, to give in. Of course, he drove her too far.

"I am not married to you yet, sir," she observed, in a low voice, between her set teeth; "and it remains with me still to decide whether I shall ever become your wife."

He wheeled his chair round, so as to look full into her face, and there was no less of bitter, malicious triumph in his eyes than in his voice, while he replied, "*Does it?* I think, perhaps you may find, my fine, resolute, haughty young lady, that you are not quite so free an agent as you suppose. Look you here, Miss Brooke—or rather Helen, for, after all, you belong to me now; and if I choose to call you Helen,

who shall interfere with me? Look you here, it's time for you and me to understand each other. I have got a pull over you, and I mean to use it. If you do not choose to fulfil your solemn engagements at my own time, and in my own manner—by Heaven, I'll make such an example of your boasted name of Brooke, that you'll hide your heads, every one of you, whenever honour is so much as spoken of amongst the upper classes, or honesty amongst the lower! I mean it, I tell you, and I'll do it too, as sure as I sit here!"

"You threaten me!" she sobbed out, wild with fear and hatred and despair. "You threaten me! What can you do?"

"I can try Mr. Walter Brooke for forgery; that is what I can do!" retorted Multiple, whose temper was rising fast. "And if I cannot transport your favourite brother for life as a convict, I have proof under my hand that will drive him out of England, and debar him from the society of every honest man on the Continent, or elsewhere. Come, Miss Brooke, this is child's play. I don't want to bully you, but you *must* know a man does not waste his chances when he enters for such a prize as yourself. That's the way to put it, isn't it? Be reasonable; *je suis bon diable moi*—not such a bad fellow after all, only I mean what I say; and no consideration on earth has ever yet turned me from an object I have resolved to accomplish."

The chain was too heavy, the pressure too severe—she could fight against it no longer, she was beginning to cry now, and a woman's tears are always the prelude to surrender.

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in such a sad, helpless voice as moved even Multiple to a certain measure of remorse.

"Be reasonable," he answered, "that is all I ask. Do not fly out at me, right or wrong, whenever you are in bad spirits, or a bad temper. We might be happy together, Helen, if you would only believe it. I think I should learn to be a better man, a different man altogether, if you could bring yourself to care for me a little. However, that will come. It *must* come, when we have known each other longer. Meantime, you have misjudged and misunderstood me. I am not here to-night to force my society on you, nor to take advantage of your loneliness. Far from it; I came down in virtue of my present connection with the family to break a little piece of bad news, on which I kept silent till you had

finished dinner, and before the servants, lest your father should by any chance learn what has taken place. It is bad news enough, but I trust there is no real cause for alarm. Your brother Jack"—

Helen gave a little cry, and sat down, looking intently in the speaker's face with her large dark eyes. He thought how handsome she was, and went on—

"Your brother Jack has met with an accident. Nothing dangerous, I honestly believe, but still a serious and unpleasant accident enough, which will prevent his being removed for some little time. He is in excellent hands, and has the best surgical advice. I took care of that. He does not like me, Helen, but still he is *your* brother."

"Oh, thank you!" she murmured. "It was good of you. I am grateful. I am, indeed. Tell me what has happened. Tell me all."

"Why, the fact is, you know, Helen, young men will be young men," replied Multiple, in what he considered a confidential, domestic tone; "and Jack, though he seems so steady, is no exception, I suppose, to the general rule. As far as I can learn, he went into an office near the Strand, belonging to a person with whom I have some slight acquaintance, for the purpose of raising money. Jack is an eldest son, you know, and your poor father's life is none of the best. I wish he had consulted me first; I might have been of service to him. However, that has nothing to do with it. Well, he seems to have had something like a fainting fit. I think I have heard him say he is subject to them in the spring—and falling, struck his head severely against some article of furniture, I believe. Nothing very alarming, after all, but still enough to keep him quiet for a day or two. I happened to be passing in the street when they were taking him to a doctor, and I need not tell you I never left him till I saw him made quite comfortable, and ascertained that he was out of danger, of course."

"Where is he?" exclaimed Helen eagerly. "I must go and nurse him! Papa is wonderfully better. I might go up to-night."

She was playing every card into his hands. He could no longer conceal Jack's whereabouts, nor was there any object in doing so; but if Helen was resolved to constitute herself head nurse forthwith, how could the gentleman become more thoroughly established as one of the family, or the lady compromise her character more completely, than by their journeying up to London together for that purpose on the morrow?

"He is at No. 100 Short Street, Strand," answered Multiple frankly. "A comfortable place enough, with the best professional advice. You will now see, Miss Brooke, what injustice you have done my motives in coming down to-night. My intention was to take your place in attendance on your father, had he been worse, or, if that was unnecessary, to offer my escort to London to-morrow that you might join your brother."

A bright blush, colouring her very temples, swept over Helen's face while he spoke, succeeded by a deadly paleness. I cannot tell what communications may have been still kept up between the George Stoneys and their old friends in Middlesworth, nor how Miss Brooke came to know Mr. Philip's address, and the fact that he was lodging with Lady Julia's Treadwell's old governess. She had heard it, nevertheless, and it had not escaped her memory. Her heart thrilled with happiness to think that she would at least see him once more, and then—a keen pang smote the fond, faithful heart to reflect how, and in what capacity, she must meet him again.

Multiple saw the blush, and the tender look in the dark eyes; he misinterpreted both, as was natural, and began to hope he might teach her to love him a little in time after all.

Perhaps this rendered him more gentle, more amenable to her wishes than he would otherwise have been. He made no objection to her early retirement, in consideration of their proposed journey, which it was agreed should take place immediately after breakfast. Nay! beyond a passing frown, and a smothered oath, he showed neither anger nor disappointment, when Helen, ringing for hand-candlesticks, adroitly bade him good-night in presence of the servants, thus avoiding any warmer leave-taking than the habits of society enjoined. Poor girl! She had not forgotten that first caress, which seemed still to fester on her brow; she shuddered at the idea of such another, loathing and dreading so her future, that she could even force herself to banish it from her thoughts.

He was well satisfied thus far. The game was going just as he wished. Of course there must be little difficulties, little hesitations, he reflected. Women were such fools! and never seemed to know their own minds; but the thing was as good as settled now, and after the journey to-morrow she would have neither wish nor excuse for delaying the ceremony that was to put an end to all this trouble and self-restraint.

He mixed himself a stiff glass of brandy and water, which he carried off to Walter's apartment, and, having made up the fire, proceeded to smoke one of his best cigars in a very contented frame of mind.

Helen's head was in a whirl. When she reached her own room and tried to look steadily at the difficulties before her, they seemed, as it were, to surround and hem her in, ere they crushed her beneath their weight. On one thing she was resolved! Nothing—no! nothing on earth should induce her to meet Philip, for the first time since that well-remembered parting, in the character of Mr. Multiple's bride. Poor fellow! he did not deserve it! Something told her how hard and heavy the blow would fall. It should not come from her hand, if she died for it. Yet she must hasten to Jack. He was evidently very seriously hurt. Her place was surely by his side. What to do? Oh! What to do? Was it woman's curse that she must thus be eternally hemmed in by forms and customs, and never, though her heart was breaking, be allowed to act for herself?

Long after her maid left her she sat looking at the fire, thinking—thinking; but as the stable clock was striking two she stole softly downstairs, in a dark morning dress, with a travelling bag in her hand. She let herself out at the back door, and, I need not say, though the lock was stiff and the bolts were rusty, woke none of the men-servants sleeping on the ground-floor for purposes of vigilance in case of alarm. Then she walked across the park to Dame Batters's cottage, roused that old woman, who took her at first for a ghost—disappointed, though reassured, when convinced of her bodily presence—asked leave to sit by her fire for an hour, binding her solemnly to secrecy, and at dawn had taken her place in the early train that would reach London long before Multiple was up.

CHAPTER XXVII

"NOBBLER" KING

JEM BATTERS, though a heavy sleeper at most times, partook, on the night in question, of the same restlessness that disturbed his mother's slumbers, and kept Miss Brooke watching so eagerly for the pale-eyed dawn. It was scarcely daylight in London, when a dismal and heartrending howl from Tatters caused him to start up broad awake on his ragged pallet, and to discharge horrible oaths at the corner in which a hairy little form could be vaguely discerned sitting on end, utterly broken-hearted and forlorn. Poor Tatters, in the recollection of his short life, had never before slept away from Bridlemere, and now to find himself in a strange place, with a strange man, uncertain where his own master was, subjected besides to the indignity of a chain and collar, was a combination of misfortunes so crushing as to call forth a succession of the loudest and most dismal wails, appealing to all creation against the injustice of his fate. He would not eat; a plate of broken victuals lay disregarded by his chain. He would not drink, and had indeed immediately upset the saucer of dirty water provided for him, in his struggles. He gasped, he panted, he whined without intermission, and at stated intervals drew out one of the long, melancholy notes that now woke Jem Batters, and elicited from that reprobate no modified expressions of anger and disgust.

The dog-stealer was not altogether satisfied with his capture. All his life he had entertained a feeling of admiration for the young squire, and he almost loved him since he had seen him hold his own so well in the fierce wrestling-bout he witnessed from his place of concealment. It went to his heart to rob so tough a fighter of his dog, and if ever Jem entertained scruples as to the exercise of his profession, it was now, sitting up in the cold light of dawn, with a dry mouth, a shaking hand, and a sense of irritation and discontent at everything in the world pervading his whole frame. He relieved his mind by flinging one of his boots

at Tatters, with a profane injunction to be quiet. The terrier bit the missile through, and shook it in defiance, but continued howling more persistently than before.

Jem resolved to consult a friend in his dilemma, and for that purpose rose from his pallet on the floor, plunged head-foremost into the shabby shooting-jacket that did duty for a counterpane, retrieved his boot, put a hat on his head, a pipe in his mouth, and so was dressed for the day.

Tatters, watching this toilet with the keenest attention, forbore to howl, earnestly trusting that a change of any kind would be a move in the right direction. The dog lay down when Jem left the room, with his mouth close to the floor, and his eyes fixed on the narrow chink below the door, as if he expected his master to appear at any moment through that aperture. He must have been disappointed when in half an hour's time his gaoler returned, accompanied by another gentleman as unlike Jack Brooke as possible.

Jem bore in his hands and hat the materials for breakfast, three pen'orth of pork, some veal pie, and a quartern of gin. He carried also a gingerbeer bottle with ink in it, a spectral steel pen, and a sheet of dirty paper. A literary effort was obviously pending, and Jem's friend afforded no assistance of the kind unless, as he expressed himself, "things was ready squared, a drain kep' handy, and linin' found!"

The gentleman on whose scholarly attainments Jem, in common with a large circle of acquaintance, placed implicit reliance, was an exceedingly smart and dirty personage, to whose profession his very remarkable exterior gave no clue.

He was short, swarthy, flat-nosed, and a good deal pitted with the smallpox; had beady black eyes, jetty ringlets, curling to the roots, more oiled than brushed, gilt earrings, and a scanty moustache. He wore a long, black tailed-coat, in the last stage of decomposition, a red shawl handkerchief with white spots, apparently no shirt, drab trousers, low shoes, and straps. To the inexperienced, he might have been a bird-fancier, a bill-sticker, a pickpocket, or a ship's steward out of place. To those who had studied more attentively the different industrial branches carried on in the lower walks of London life, he represented many an unfortunate and deserving object for the bounty of the charitable.

He was the daughter of a beneficed clergyman in the Isle of Wight. He was the widow of a Crimean officer, reduced to the last stage of distress by the failure of two commercial houses and a bubble bank. He was a Pole escaped from Siberia, and a missionary off whose person slices had been

cut and eaten raw by the Fee-jee islanders. He had a mother in a madhouse; a young wife attacked by paralysis, and a large family of children, with but one suit of clothes amongst them, boys and girls. He had invented a patent, and was waiting for the five hundred pounds promised by Government: therefore only required a loan for immediate necessities, to be repaid on the fourteenth of next month. He was, in himself, a whole division of discharged soldiers, with pensions that had expired, for unaccountable reasons, at unusually short periods. Nay, he was the mother of five children at a birth, all living, and all demanding large supplies of that maternal sustenance which could be furnished by substantial food alone!

Notwithstanding his Protean nature, and the various characters he adopted with such facility, he represented in Jem Batters's garret nothing more interesting than a smart, dirty, dapper, ugly little man of five-and-forty; known to the society he adorned by the name of "Nobbler" King.

Breakfast, laid on a soiled pocket-handkerchief, soon disappeared. Tatters was offered a morsel of veal pie, which, possibly recognising the presence of his natural enemy, the cat, he smelt at and declined. Then Jem took a pull at the quartern measure, coughed, wiped his lips, and passed it to the Nobbler, who followed suit ere he proposed immediate application to business.

"Shall us draw it mild, Mr. Batters?" said he, "or shall us draw it strong? Is it somethin' to disclose of a appallin' natur', on receipt of a small sum in postage-stamps, to pay unawoidable expenses, from a well-wisher and a Friend? Or is it just the regular thing—urgent distress—'umble supplication—knuckle down—and grab wot we can get?"

The Nobbler spread his paper on the rabbit-hutch, smoothed it out with his greasy coat-cuff, and winked solemnly at his employer.

"It's on my mind about the dawg," answered Jem uneasily. "'Tain't in my buttons to keep the dawg. He's a *beautiful* toy-dawg, too, Nobbler,—ain't him? The chap's a good chap as owns the dawg, an' he shall have him back, so he shall, free gratis for nothin'."

Nobbler King's eyes twinkled. It seemed a good joke to hear Jem Batters talk about returning the stolen animal without payment; but professional etiquette forbade him to interrupt the meditations which it would be his part to comb out into an involved, eloquent, and ill-spent appeal.

"Tell'ee how it is!" exclaimed Jem, bringing his fist down on the rabbit-hutch with an emphasis that bounced the cork

Blackmail.

out of the ink-bottle, and drew a sharp, angry bark from Tatters. "This here's wot I call a game, this is! an' I'd as soon be shot of it as not, mate. 'Tain't the dawg, bless ye, 'tis the chap as owns the dawg, wot beats me in this here game. There've been murder done, Nobbler, or next thing to murder, anyway, an' I've a-been a what-d'ye-call afore the fact, I have, an' I ain't a-goin' to keep dark, I ain't, not if they was to hoffer liberal. Ten cooter, we'll say, an' arf paid in advance!"

Jem paused—reflected—finished the gin, apparently in absence of mind, much to Mr. King's disgust, and then following the wisest course with a professional adviser of any kind, made a clean breast of it, and related to his companion the struggle he had witnessed, the foul play that had proved fatal to one of the combatants, and all the circumstances under which he obtained possession of the dog.

Nobbler King ruminated deeply. This, he was of opinion, seemed a case for a threatening letter, and on that peculiar style of composition he especially prided himself. The two laid their heads together for a long consultation, nor indeed could they arrive at any definite conclusion till another measure of gin had been sent for and consumed, at the visitor's expense.

Under this additional stimulant, with much care, repetition, and forethought, the following epistle was concocted for the extortion of money from as unlikely a person as could have been selected in the whole of London, namely, Mr. Pounder, of the firm of Multiple and Pounder, Short Street, Strand:

"MR. POUNDER—SIR:—

"HONOURED SIR, this from a Friend and Well-wisher, who was at the time a Witness, also whereby you are deceived in thinking that your Cruel rage and bloody, barbarous doings can lie unbeknown, Mr. Pounder,

"Sir, it was broad daylight, and he saw you strike the young Man down, likewise the Humbrellier what directed the Fatal blow, and can swear the same truly in this court. You ought to know, honoured Sir, as murder never go Unpunished, and if you will send three shillings and sixpence in postage stamps to the address herewith you will greatly oblige a Friend; and if i had not respected of you this would not have taken place; and so no more at Present from your Well-wisher.

"If two half-crowns was payable more convenient, i can swear easier to the Other, him as took off directly as the coast was clear."

Jem Batters grinned with intense approbation, while this production was read aloud. It comprised, in his opinion, all the elements of grandeur. It was vague, awful, mysterious, indefinite. At the worst, he opined, it could not but bring back three shillings and sixpence in postage stamps; nor was

he without hope that its mixture of threat, promise, and persuasion, might produce, by return of post, the more liberal offering of hush-money comprised in the two half-crowns suggested by the last clause.

Nobbler King saw that his composition was appreciated, and determined to work out a plan of his own that had been forming in his brain ever since he sat down to breakfast opposite Tatters; and had been struck with the correct points and general beauty of that hirsute and high-bred little dog.

The sheet was folded, wafered and directed, not very legibly, to the proposed recipient. Jem suggested a further outlay of one penny, for a postage stamp, ere he dropped it into the nearest letter-box. The Nobbler shook his head in manifest disapproval of this unnecessary extravagance.

"A pen'orth o' baccy would do us a sight more good," said he; "and wot's the use of your paying the Queen's flunkies, when you can wait upon yourself? Here, ketch hold—take and drop it in at Pounder's door. The walk will do you good, man, and I'll stay an' take care of the dawg till you come back."

Now this arrangement of his friend's was calculated to extricate Jem from another difficulty in which he was placed by the surreptitious possession of Tatters. The dog was so shy and strange in its new position, that he hardly liked to take it with him, for fear it should slip its collar and make its escape in the street; while, on the other hand, to leave so valuable a fancy article unprotected at home, was a temptation to which he had rather not subject the honesty of the neighbours, particularly with so bad a lock as that which fastened his crazy door. He brushed himself up a bit, therefore, by the simple process of lacing his boots and turning his hat hindside before, ere he sallied forth on his errand, leaving Nobbler King with a yard of clay in his mouth to keep watch on Tatters till his return. A trust fulfilled by that worthy in the usual manner since the days of Diomed; of which more anon.

Jem Batters proceeded without delay in the direction of Short Street; but so much time had been consumed in the discussion of breakfast and the composition of the missive he carried (for greater safety) in his hat, that it was near noon ere he reached the money-lender's door. Here he dropped his note stealthily through the aperture provided for that purpose, and hastened up the street, to return down the other side, and cast wistful glances at the house in which he knew Jack

Brooke was lying wounded, suffering, perhaps insensible, or even dead!

Jem's knees knocked against each other when he saw the blinds down in the front drawing-room; a precaution taken indeed to prolong the slumbers that heralded the patient's recovery; but which Jem, with a confused notion of obituary manners and customs, interpreted as a signal that all was over. His heart failed him, and he shrank with natural cowardice from ascertaining the truth he dreaded; turning homewards at once, and revolving as he went, whether, if Jack Brooke had really no more use for him, he was not justified in making what he could out of his dog.

Thus it came to pass, that at the corner of Leicester Square, Jem nearly ran into the arms of Sir Archibald Brooke, walking with a stout, fresh-coloured young man, whom it was not difficult to identify as Mr. Ragman de Rolle. The latter, who had imbibed the greatest possible veneration for his friend's uncle, had called thus early on the old soldier, to ask his advice in the purchase of some saddlery, and Sir Archibald, dearly loving and thoroughly understanding everything appertaining to his favourite animal, the horse, readily accompanied the subaltern through a long and minute inspection of saddle-trees, blankets, valises, wallets, holsters, stirrup-irons, head-stalls, tiger-skins, and shaving-brushes—all the gaudy paraphernalia appertaining to the equipment of a mounted hussar.

After a morning so spent, it was but natural the pair should light their cigars and saunter westwards, with an eventual prospect of luncheon at the Rag. The young hussar was spending his fortnight's leave between "Returns" in London, and made the most of its every moment. No pedestrian in strong training did harder work than honest Rags in the pursuit of pleasure. It was severe enough formerly, when he contented himself with the easy dissipations and convivial amusements of his club; but now that he aspired to become one of the great world, and to frequent a grade of society brightened by such ornaments as Lady Goneril and the Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil, why, not only did the bodily fatigue become excessive and exhaustive, but the wear-and-tear of mind was beginning to print little marks about his eyes, and to fade the rosy colour in his cheek.

The unexpected sight of Sir Archibald brought Jem Batters back at once to his former self. All the superstructure of knowing London worldliness and slang street-born assurance melted away at the first glimpse of that kind,

familiar face. The old feudal feeling, the sentiment of clanship, not quite extinct amongst the country peasantry of England, gained its accustomed ascendency, and, Jem never knew exactly how or why, he found himself standing in the middle of a crossing, with his hat off, asking Sir Archibald's pardon; and, while he shrank from the soldier's keen eye, pouring into his attentive ear an incoherent tale, from which it only seemed clear that Jack Brooke had been murderously attacked by a person named Pounder, and was now lying dangerously wounded, if not dead, in a lodging-house, No. 100 Short Street, Strand.

Sir Archibald's adventurous life had taught him to extract, no less speedily than correctly, the salient points of a perplexed and exaggerated narrative. He had dealt heretofore with panting aide-de-camps despatched by infuriated generals to require impossible reinforcements at a critical moment. He had examined frightened peasants, caught, collared, and cross-questioned, with a pistol at each ear, and elicited an approximation to the truth out of their stammering *patois*. He had even sifted the evidence of native Indian purveyors, and more than once fished up a grain of fact from a whole bushel of falsehood, overlaid with all the trope and metaphor of Oriental eloquence. Also, on several occasions, generally under a galling fire from the enemy, it had been his lot to do duty with officers of all ranks, whose method of getting out of a mess was the issue of contradictory orders, with a storm of personal abuse, accompanied by oaths unfit for publication. He was, therefore, pretty well accustomed to go quietly, coolly, and by the shortest way, to the information he wanted to gain.

In a few minutes he had learned the precise hour at which his nephew was attacked, the residence of his assailant and the place where he lay. Also his informant's own address, extorted unwillingly, and only on the strongest compulsion. Then he thought for a while, determining to ask no assistance, at least for the present, from the police; reflecting that, if necessary, he could so describe his informant as would enable justice to lay hold on him at any moment; whereas, if this should turn out to be some foolish, young man's brawl, there was no occasion to make it public; and so concluding, put half a crown in Jem's willing hand, and turned with a calm face and a courteous apology, to take leave of his friend.

But staunch Rags was not to be thus shaken off.

"I didn't mean to listen," said he; "but I couldn't help

hearing. I can't tell whether I've learned more than you wish me to know, but as far as I can make out, Jack Brooke seems to be in a difficulty. They're great friends of mine, the Brookes, and—and—you've been very kind to me yourself, Sir Archibald. I'm not a talking chap, you know; but I feel these things. I do indeed. There's nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be of service to any of the family. Two heads are sometimes better than one, Sir Archibald, even when there's as much difference as between yours and mine. There's a bother of some sort, I'm sure. I should take it as a great favour if you would allow me to see you through it!"

Sir Archibald knew, nobody better, how to distinguish between the conventional politeness of an aquaintance, and the unshrinking loyalty of a friend. He grasped Rags warmly by the hand.

"You're a trump!" was all he said. "I know I can depend upon you. I'll tell you what it is, De Rolle, I shouldn't mind having two or three fellows like you at my back if ever I went soldiering again."

Then the two linked arms and walked off to Short Street, without another word; the younger man very proud and happy, because of the senior's commendations—for Sir Archibald's compliments were precious from their rarity, and it may be that Rags, with the keen enthusiasm of youth, rated his companion even more highly than he deserved.

In the meantime, Pounder, comparing himself, with a grim smile, to an old spider watching in the corner, sat at his knee-hole table in an exceedingly uncomfortable frame of mind. He had taken his troubles down to Balham the day before, and they had poisoned the whole happiness of that pleasant retreat for him all night. He could not even work them off in the garden at daybreak; and when he reached the office to find no news of Multiple, no directions how to act, they assumed a magnitude that completely cowed and overwhelmed him. He had ascertained by inquiry next door that the patient was still alive. He could elicit nothing more decided from the maid-of-all-work, who, like her species, delighted in generalities; and this was the only scrap of consolation he could get. Ere he had thoroughly digested it, however, he received the threatening letter that represented the joint abilities of Jem Batters and Nobbler King. This mysterious production only added to the multitude of his perplexities.

One thing alone seemed clear—that the ship was wrecked,

the helm abandoned, and it behoved him now to shift for himself. He had no feelings of regard for his partner, very little *esprit-de-corps* connected with the business. Mutual interest alone had held it together, and the only principle acted on by both its heads throughout, was to take care of Number One. Pounder began to think he had better throw his partner over, and make terms for himself.

He speedily ran through a rough calculation of his debts to Mr. Multiple — debts, that is to say, for which he was legally liable, considering that of a few trifling temporary advances, not so stringently secured, it was, as he whispered softly to himself, a waste of time to make account.

The legal debts amounted, however, to a large sum, though not quite beyond his reach, if he chose to incur great personal sacrifices for that which he felt now to be a question of personal safety. He was aware, also, that the two bills he held, or at least one of them, was valued very highly by the Brookes as affecting the honour of their family. It would, doubtless, fetch a proportionate price, and he felt justified, under existing circumstances, in making terms on his own account. Altogether, he was actually debating whether it would not be advisable for him to communicate at once with Sir Archibald, whom he knew by name and reputation, when on answering a knock at the door, that his ear told him proceeded from no policeman's or detective's hand, he found himself face to face with that gentleman and his friend.

They had inquired at the neighbouring house how the patient was getting on, and, more fortunate than Pounder, had seen Miss Prince in the passage. She whispered to them that her charge was asleep, and they discreetly withdrew at once to prosecute their researches next door.

Pounder backed civilly before his visitors into the very room in which the conflict had taken place. He affected, of course, to ignore the motives of their presence, and rubbing his hands blandly, as usual, remarked that "it was a fine growing morning for the time of year; and he never in his life remembered money so tight in the City."

Sir Archibald took a good survey of his man, measuring him, as it were, morally and physically with his eye. What he saw in no way deterred him from the straightforward course it was his nature to adopt. He accepted the chair offered him, drew it close to the table, and looked Pounder full in the face.

"You are a man of the world, Mr. Pounder," said he,

"and so am I. I know you, and I daresay you know me. We can trust each other in a matter of plain sailing, where it is the interest of neither to deceive. I have a bargain to propose."

Pounder smiled.

"Sir Archibald Brooke, I believe," he observed, with a courteous bow. "Money matters connected with the family, I presume? You are aware, Sir Archibald, that our clients rely implicitly on our honour, and that these affairs are conducted in the strictest confidence. Is this gentleman a relative, may I ask, bearing the same name as yourself?"

The old soldier dissembled his impatience, though the words "honour" and "confidence," in Pounder's mouth, irritated him to the last degree.

"This gentleman's name is De Rolle," he answered. "Mr. de Rolle, Loyal Dancing Hussars. He is an intimate friend of mine, and the business on which I am entering has nothing whatever to do with either honour, or confidence, or secrecy."

Pounder resolved to make the best of it now, and was indeed rather pleased with the turn things had taken.

"This gentleman's presence," said he, "much facilitates matters between us. I shall have the satisfaction of consulting you both, as men of honour, on an affair of the utmost delicacy. I presume I can rely on your assurance that it goes no further than this room."

Sir Archibald was no swearer in general, but he came out with an oath now.

"—— it all, sir!" he exclaimed, "you talk as if you were an officer and a gentleman, with the honour of a whole regiment confided to your keeping! Come, sir, let us waive all this absurdity, and speak in plain English. I know enough to send you to hard labour, if not over the seas as a convict, within two months from this time, if I choose to divulge my knowledge, and produce a witness who saw everything that took place in this very room only yesterday. You are liable to be arrested now—at any moment, for conspiracy, if not for manslaughter, and you carry it off, sir, by Heaven! as if you were a general of division at his own headquarters."

Pounder liked fair fighting best. He was neither annoyed nor intimidated at the other's tone; on the contrary, he felt it a change and a relief to have to deal with an honest man, who meant what he said.

"I am glad you take my candour in such good part, Sir Archibald," was his temperate reply. "What took place in

this office yesterday was no fault of mine. Your nephew, a fine, athletic young man, Sir Archibald, endeavoured to possess himself of certain papers, by force, and in our joint resistance—for my partner, Mr. Multiple, happened to be in the next room—I regret such necessary violence was used, as has been productive of very serious consequences. My partner, Sir Archibald, is a man of violent temper under excitement, and your witness—if witness you have, though, of course, I do not dispute your word—will have informed you that Mr. Multiple struck the decisive blow. I am pretty strong and active," added Pounder, looking down at his own stalwart person with some satisfaction, "and could have protected my property for myself, without resorting to such desperate extremities."

There was no resisting the man's frank, good-humoured manner, while he spoke. Both the visitors began to conceive a better opinion of him than they entertained at their first entrance.

Sir Archibald had winced, visibly, when he heard Multiple's name mentioned, though he was more vexed than surprised, for Pounder's information only corroborated certain grievous suspicions he had long entertained, and the skeleton in his cupboard at present was the frequency of such a man's visits to his niece at Bridlemere.

Nevertheless, he put all this aside for future consideration, and proceeded at once with the business in hand.

"We understand each other, Mr. Pounder," said he. "Tell me all you know; I'll make it worth your while. I think we ought to be able to come to some arrangement without requiring the magistrate's warrant, after all."

Thus adjured, Pounder related, simply and truthfully enough, the circumstances that led to Jack Brooke's casualty, as they occurred, coming by degrees to the point at which the two corresponding bills had been produced, and evolving very cautiously his own suspicions of foul play, if not forgery, on the part of the gentleman by whom these compromising documents were drawn out.

"In all my business experience, Sir Archibald," he continued, in a tone of deep feeling, and with an air of the utmost frankness, "I cannot call to mind a similar occurrence. Mistakes, indeed, often happen with young men, who are eager, hurried, and ignorant of detail; but such a mistake as this seems so awkward, so unfortunate—what shall I say?—so deplorable, that I am only speaking the feelings of my innermost heart, when I declare it was distressing to me, as

it is incomprehensible. It would be a great object, doubtless, for the sake of all concerned, that both these bills should return into the possession of the family—should, indeed, be taken up, and destroyed without an hour's delay. I have them here in this room, in my own keeping, notwithstanding Mr. Brooke's bold and dashing attack yesterday; but I am scarcely justified in parting with them, even for the highest considerations, without my partner's consent; and you will see our difficulty, Sir Archibald; do we not run a great risk of rendering ourselves amenable to the laws of our country by compounding a felony?"

Shot after shot he poured into the old soldier, sitting upright in his chair, paler and paler, as he took every charge without flinching; but who groaned at the final missile as if it had reached the seat of life at last. The honour of the Brookes was to him a question of faith and worship, little short of a religion, and every nerve quivered with shame and anger, while the horrible suspicion dawned on him more and more clearly, that his brother's son had been guilty of so foul a deed. Well! if the family honour lay a-bleeding, they must throw a cloak over it, were it of cloth of gold! Sir Archibald set his teeth hard, and spoke out so calm and distinct, that Rags looked round at him astonished.

"Name your terms," said he. "Fill up a cheque here on this table. I pledge myself to sign it with one hand, when the bills are put in the other."

Our friend Rags, although in a general way detesting very cordially anything approaching to business, and when fairly collared half-yearly by his own agent, yawning lamentably during the whole interview, with every mark of disgust and inattention, had listened eagerly to the foregoing dialogue, as though it poured in a stream of light on much that had hitherto been dark, mysterious, and inexplicable. He had fidgeted a good deal in his chair, looking from Pounder to Sir Archibald, ready, impatient, yet waiting his opportunity to strike. Now he started up, to the intense astonishment of both, and laid his hand forcibly on the latter's arm.

"Hold on," said he. "You are making a long rigmarole about nothing. Perhaps I can explain this matter clearer than either of you."

Pounder wished nothing better. He anticipated now the proof positive of all that he had suggested, and an offer of hush-money from Sir Archibald that would make him independent of his partner for life.

He produced the bills from the drawer in which they were locked away, and spreading the earlier in date on the table under its indorser's eye, asked solemnly—

"Mr. de Rolle, is that your signature?"

Rags examined it attentively, and nodded. He could have sworn to it with a clear conscience, therefore was his affirmative very quiet and unmoved.

Pounder took the second bill, to spread it out in the same impressive manner.

"And this?" he asked. "You will observe the difference. Is this also your signature?"

"Yes," exclaimed Rags vehemently, blushing at the same time all over his honest cheeks and forehead. "I backed poor Walter's bills for six hundred altogether, and if they're due, I'm ready to pay the money up now. Cheque on my banker—drawn here—Pounder or bearer—Multiple or order —anyhow you like to have it!"

It was perhaps the first lie Rags had ever told in his life. Though he blushed so red during its delivery he was not in the slightest degree ashamed of it, nor indeed, if falsehood can ever be justifiable, had he any reason to be so.

Pounder's chin fell to his watch-chain. Sir Archibald was not deceived, but he shot a grateful glance at his young friend that would have gone straight to his heart had Rags not been looking out at window, with a transparent affectation of complete indifference and content.

Pounder was the first to speak. He saw the great game was up, but, true to his professional instincts, he also discerned no contemptible pickings to be gathered off the wreck.

"The bills do not fall due," said he, "for nearly a week. It would perhaps be advisable to purchase them from me at something less than the full amount."

He spoke to willing listeners enough. When Sir Archibald and his generous young friend walked out of Pounder's offices, Walter Brooke was no longer in danger of detection. Moreover, Helen's uncle, by a judicious appeal to Pounder's self-interest, had prepared an additional weapon or two, both offensive and defensive, against the man to whom Helen had plighted her word that she would be his wife.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LADIES' MILE

NOBBLER KING, left to his own devices, smoked out his yard of clay with great deliberation, ere he proceeded to the corner in which poor Tatters continued to bewail his captivity. Then he turned his cuffs back, pulled a brush from his pocket, and taking the dog between his knees with professional dexterity, dressed him over from end to end, entirely regardless of the little animal's growling protestations and vicious struggles to get free. When he had thus arranged the terrier's toilet to his satisfaction he completed his own with the same instrument—first his hat, then his hair, then his coat, and so prepared himself for supervision by the great world. He next inflicted a good deal of unnecessary discipline on his victim, till the animal shrank against the wall sufficiently cowed and subdued, in which state he left it alone for about five minutes, shutting the door after him as though he did not mean to return, but bursting in and releasing the captive when at the last stage of despondency, and thus presenting himself at its need in the light of a liberator and a friend.

Tatters now agreed to be carried under the Nobbler's arm without resistance, and the two journeyed in this fashion all along Pall Mall, by St. James's Street, past White's window, in which nothing was as yet visible but a pair of large grey whiskers, a glossy hat, and the broadsheet of the *Times*, and so by the south side of Piccadilly to the corner of Hyde Park. Here the Nobbler put his burden down for a minute or two, but without letting go of the string which secured it, to so arrange his own hair and neckcloth very carefully under the clock. It was five minutes past one, a beautiful spring day in the first burst of the London season, and already the Park was full.

I can remember, nor is it so very long ago, when the busy people, who have nothing to do, paraded, horse and foot, with the utmost regularity in that promenade which is called

Rotten Row, once in the twenty-four hours, at 5.30 p.m. This daily walk or ride seemed sufficient in those idle times for all purposes of air, exercise, and conversation; but the Anglo-Saxon energy of to-day is not so easily satisfied. We like to go in for our London season now, as we do for our other pleasures, tooth and nail. We meet our dear friends, whose name is legion, each one of whom to know is to love, and none of whom ever bore us in the least, at a nine o'clock dinner, where we are packed as neatly as the present costume of the nation will admit. Just before we begin to get pleasant, it is time to go away, but our regrets at parting must be consoled to feel that in another hour we shall all be together again, on a staircase, jammed so close, perhaps, as to have no room to breathe; but still, delightful thought, in proximity to those whose conversation never fails to raise our spirits and improve our minds. Torn from these blissful scenes—and I appeal to everybody over five-and-twenty whether an announcement that the carriage "stops the way" is to be confronted as a calamity, or welcomed as a release—how delightful to reflect that in six hours at most it will be time to rise and breakfast, in order that by noon we may be ready dressed and prepared at all points to meet the same people again. After luncheon, however, we can exist without them for a space of nearly three hours; but we are back in the old place to look for them once more by six o'clock, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

It is this ceaseless repetition which renders the pleasures of a London season, though vastly amusing and exciting, no doubt, somewhat exhausting, and indeed monotonous, to persons of only average energy and good spirits.

Nobbler King, however, who possessed more than his share of both these advantages, and was, besides, in his own degree, a thorough man of the world, looked on the gay, brilliant, parti-coloured scene that met his eyes in the Ride with every mark of scientific interest and critical approval. To a "cad" about London, who knows every celebrity, man and woman, perfectly well by sight, who is also acquainted with a good deal of their private history that they hardly know themselves, it is more than amusing, it is positively instructive, to watch the gorgeous figures shifting here and there in the human kaleidoscope. He knows, or thinks he does, why that gentleman on the Arab has made six short turns, only a quarter of the way to Kensington gate, and why that lady in the bright-coloured habit, with all that beautiful hair, will come leisurely down at a walk, on the

Knightsbridge side, so as to meet him, quite by accident, under the trees. He knows how that fine-looking man, on a thousand guineas' worth of horseflesh, cantering the treasure so deftly in all the triumph of equestrian skill, has two bills out that he is at his wits' end to meet, and will stand or fall on the settling day of next Derby, by the issue of the great race. He has an eye to perceive, too, that the rider in cloth boots, who looks and is a man of wealth and substance, affects to be anxiously seeking a friend for whom he waits, because his thorough-bred hack, with its tail tucked down, declines to move one step farther in an opposite direction to its own stables. He knows what this wonderful Amazon, the boldest of the bold, gave for the perfect creature she rides so beautifully; how it is bred, where she bought it, and who is to pay for it. He knows the pet name of that pretty pony, as of the titled little lady it carries, and of her three tall handsome sisters on their tall handsome horses, in charge of dear papa, a stalwart nobleman not less than sixteen stone, all scouring along at speed, talking and laughing in the highest possible state of health, spirits, and good-humour. He knows, too, though nobody else does, the real name of this elaborate individual, seen every day riding at a foot's pace, faultlessly dressed, superbly mounted, holding communication with no man, and supposed by the laughing young critics who hang over the rails and remark on the cavalry as they pass, to be a tailor's showman, a pickpocket in disguise, or an escaped lunatic. He is, in short, perfectly conversant with the persons, horses, carriages, names, titles, follies, extravagances, and vices of the aristocracy, no less than with the attempts of the numerous class beneath them to imitate their superiors in those matters which are least worthy of imitation.

Nobbler King, therefore, feels himself to belong, in a manner, to the gay world, and walks across the Ride, holding Tatters under his arm, with none of the diffidence that renders this passage an awkward and painful ordeal to quiet country clergymen, or respectable squires of many acres, who are unaccustomed to the bustle and publicity of metropolitan life.

Mr. King is not without acquaintances here and there, of his own class and profession, but etiquette seems to forbid mutual recognition for the present; and although he was drinking with that sodden-looking gentleman at his elbow till two o'clock this morning, a scarce perceptible wink of the near eye is the only greeting vouchsafed. The sodden-

looking gentleman, who is encumbered with a poodle in a blue ribbon, a King Charles spaniel in a string, and two toy terriers in his waistcoat, makes no sign whatever. He has remarked Tatters, notwithstanding, and recognising his friend's versatile talents, observes approvingly within himself, "This is one of the Nobbler's games, this is. Never said nothink to me, nor nobody, he didn't. He's a deep 'un, the Nobbler—a precious deep 'un. He's as deep as a tailor's thimble, he is."

The Nobbler's profundity, however, being an incontestable question, no further notice is taken of his movements by the sodden-looking gentleman, who pursues his own way amongst the nurses and children on the grass, while Mr. King, curling his ringlets about his eyes with his unoccupied hand—for he cherishes the delusion that he is an exceedingly good-looking man, and much admired by the female portion of our aristocracy—proceeds along the shaded walk, which at this hour is crowded with the prettiest dresses and the prettiest faces in Europe, and where to-day, for the first time in the season, not a chair is to be had for love or money.

The ladies have come out in high force and unusual numbers. Like snails after a shower; nay, rather let me say, like roses after rain, they are taking advantage of the bright spring sunshine to add a gleam to their petals, and a shade of deeper colour to their bloom. It is the first real fine day they have had, and their light summer dresses look fresh, and pure, and delicate as the blossoms in a cherry orchard. Parasols are up, of course, and there is, indeed, glare enough to warrant a general display of this defensive apparatus, which I have, nevertheless, often observed unfurled under the darkest skies. The tender green leaves gleam and quiver over a thousand dainty heads in their transparent little bonnets. Slender feet, encased in kid and bronze, rest lightly on the dry white gravel. Eyes are glancing, hands waving, tongues going, gossip reigns supreme, while the men who let the chairs walk to and fro, exulting, though serene, since all are occupied, and all are paid for, wooden, wire and canework, from end to end.

Amongst the different groups that formed the entire mass of good looks, good manners, and doubtless good intentions, I have endeavoured faintly to sketch out, there was one, consisting of three people huddled gracefully together under a tree, that attracted the Nobbler's attention, in common with most other occupants of the Ride, both horse and foot. Innumerable looks were directed at this little party from

eyes that could shoot rays nearly as bright as its own. Innumerable hats, constructed by the best makers, were flourished in its honour; and many a generous steed, with sensitive mouth and severe bridle, felt himself pressed up to his bit once more, for the hundredth time, because his rider would fain pass before this trio to the greatest advantage.

Comments, polite though ill-natured, were made on it in every tone by every observer, and the buffoon of the hour constructed in its honour an elaborate jest on the spot, for the amusement of his male audience, which witticism, however, when diluted for feminine ears, was found to have lost its point, and to be neither laughable nor appropriate. Two of the group were perhaps two of the prettiest women in London, the third incontestably one of the dullest noblemen in the Upper House.

Nevertheless, they seemed perfectly well satisfied with each other as they sat.

The Duchess of Merthyr-Tydvil had quite recovered her cold, and was permanently established at Caradoc House, Circus Square, for the London season. Her Grace had been a great promoter of the early Park movement, and was indeed a staunch admirer of all out-of-doors amusements. I am certain I met her once at Cremorne, behind an exceedingly thick veil, on Merthyr-Tydvil's arm, but I do not think she liked it; and after she had seen him shoot the chamois that scours over its perennial hill at the end of the tube, and knock the cushion that trys your fighting powers into the middle of next week, she had quite enough, not caring to stay for the fireworks, but well satisfied to get her duke back into the brougham, and drop him at Pratt's to finish his evening in less questionable society.

The Park, at noon, however, suited her Grace's taste to a nicety. She could bring little Caradoc here in the shortest of frilled trousers and the brightest of velvet jackets; also his papa, when not otherwise engaged (the latter was, at the present moment, sculling his heir-apparent about on the Serpentine); and she could chaperone Lady Julia too, who had taken a great liking to the penny chairs at this hour of the day, and for some inscrutable reasons of her own, never rode Cockamaroo of late till five o'clock p.m., and then very often gave him a good gallop in the country. She was apparently thinking of that favourite horse, or some other very engrossing subject, even now, for, although her eyes and her talk sparkled as usual, she relapsed into occasional fits of abstraction, lasting for several seconds at a time, during

which she seemed profoundly unconscious of her companions' presence, and not half so much wearied as was natural by the conversation of Lord Mexico.

I suppose a *real* bore is the person of all others who has the least notion what a bore he is! Nature seems to have provided plate armour for him within, as she has for the rhinoceros without. To say that he is impervious to a hint expresses nothing. He is invulnerable to the most stinging sarcasm, as he is insensible of the most pointed rebuke. A barb that would quiver in anybody else's flesh drops from his coat of mail, foiled and blunted at his feet. It is one of his peculiarities that his voice never varies in its harsh, undeviating, regulated monotony, but is always out of tune in exactly the same degree. Nobody ever knew a bore with a cold or sore throat, or such accidental impediment to the exercise of his vocation. He is in capital wind, too, habitually, and does his work without the slightest symptoms of distress. When fastened on his victim, there is even a severe beauty in the order and method with which he fulfils his task. That he is a calamity of no trifling calibre, I concede, but I am willing at the same time to hope that he teaches us many useful social lessons—such as forbearance, self-restraint, and the art of swallowing grievous and protracted yawns with a smooth face. Lord Mexico found small reason to complain of incivility or inattention from his listener, and believed himself, no doubt, to be an eloquent and agreeable man.

He was engaged at present in describing a young retriever to Lady Julia, who sometimes listened and sometimes did not, but made no scruple of cutting across his conversation with irrelevant remarks of her own whenever the occasion prompted an interruption—Lady Goneril's ball, at which they had all met within the last twelve hours, affording a subject for at least five minutes serious discussion.

"They are curly and sagacious, you know," proceeded his lordship, drawing circles in the gravel with the point of his cane; "and come to heel at once, with scarce any breaking, but you must be careful not to speak too harshly; and if ever you lay your hand on them"—

"They spoil your dress to a certainty, my dear," said Lady Julia to the duchess. "I shall leave off altogether, I think, unless the ball-givers can produce a better set of dancing-men. I had room enough last night, I allow, but, literally, not a partner who could keep time except one, and he was a conceited minx, at home from Eton for his sister's marriage. I liked the pluck of the thing asking me, so I

waltzed with him, and he waltzed very well. Mind you have Caradoc taught before he goes into long stockings, dear!"

"Carry takes after papa, and can do everything!" answered the duchess good-humouredly. "Now, I thought it was a capital ball. I'm sure I was so stiff when I came down to breakfast, I could hardly put one foot before the other."

"In stiffness after severe exercise," continued Lord Mexico, with a dry unmoved voice, as if he was reading Colonel Hawker's instructions to sportsmen, "I have found it a good plan to chafe the limbs gently with the hand before my sitting-room fire; and my keeper quite agrees with my suggestion, that, whenever every other remedy fails, nothing does so much good as"—

"A ball again to-night, and another to-morrow, and mamma's muffled drum, as I call it, to-day from five to seven!" yawned Lady Julia wearily. "What a bore it all is, dear! I think I must be getting too old for society. I've a great mind to take up politics: the dullest men seem interested about that; and I could *coach* papa famously with the Blue Books. Well, there's one comfort: nothing ever *can* be so stupid again as Lady Goneril's ball last night!"

"Hush!" exclaimed the duchess. "Here she comes. My stars! what a bonnet!"

The bonnet thus apostrophised was indeed nodding slowly down the walk, poised on the lofty roll of Lady Goneril's magnificent hair. Its wearer had tired of her author some weeks ago, and was now chiefly occupied with what she called her duty to society. This conscientious state of mind prompted her to endless balls and parties on her own account, as well as to attend those of her numerous acquaintance, so that her life was one of incessant motion; and although still exceedingly handsome, she was paler and thinner than when she visited Norman's Cross from St. Barbs.

The same spirit of sacrifice to those inexorable Furies, *les convenances*, bade her insist upon poor old Goneril hobbling about, arm-in-arm with her, whenever his gouty feet would permit; and this nobleman, who was good-nature personified, though he had done exactly what he liked best for forty years, found himself in his old age subjected to a course of severe discipline and exercise such as he had scrupulously avoided all his life.

Though very well hatted, wigged, dyed, cravated, and girthed up, he trotted along, somewhat ruefully, by the side of his tall, handsome wife, and only brightened a little when

he caught sight of Lady Julia, who was an immense favourite with all old gentlemen of the superannuated *roué* school. "She was so clever," they said, tapping their antediluvian old snuff-boxes with their wasted old knuckles. "Such manner, such tact, such *savoir-vivre*, and such a little devil with it all, that it was positively quite refreshing to sit next to her!"

He mumbled out an unintelligible compliment on her good looks, and she accorded him her hand with far greater cordiality than she would have shown to a younger and more appropriate gallant. Lord Mexico had not yet thoroughly broke his retriever, he had only now arrived at the stage when it is advisable to accustom the dog gradually to the sight and sound of a gun. Lady Julia had almost forgotten he was there.

The duchess and Lady Goneril exchanged compliments about last night's ball. Then the latter turned to the younger lady, and told her how beautiful she looked on that occasion.

"Your dress was per—fection, my dear," said she; "and I assure you everybody said you were *the* ornament of my room."

To which Lady Julia demurely answered, "That is a very high compliment, for it was a most charming ball!"

"So good of you both to come," replied Lady Goneril, passing on with a smile and a bow, to repeat the same sincere dialogue with the next group, and the next, and the next, all the way down, till the old lord should stop dead lame before they quite reached Apsley House. But long ere this the subject of the ball had been forgotten by our trio, and Mexico had brought his retriever to the point at which he thought fit to puff off small charges of powder in its ears.

Presently no less a person walked by their chairs without recognising them than Mr. Ragman de Rolle, puffing absently at his cigar.

Rags was very much preoccupied, and very unhappy. Had it been otherwise, he would have glanced shyly about in search of his few acquaintances, appealing to them for nods of recognition, and blushing painfully while he passed under the batteries that range so formidably along the whole of "the ladies' mile."

To-day, however, he was too miserable to care for ridicule or encouragement. His idol, you see, had fallen, and he could not set it up again. He had hitherto considered Walter Brooke the pattern of all that a gentleman should be; and now that his eyes were opened, he longed painfully

to be in the dark once more. It seemed so completely a matter of course to honest Rags to have saved his brother officer's worldly reputation at any sacrifice, that the consciousness of having done so gave him not the slightest pleasure. He dreaded meeting him again, he dreaded going back to the regiment, he dreaded the horrible power he now possessed over the man he had hitherto regarded as so superior to himself. Altogether, Rags had never felt less comfortable than when he entered the Park on the present occasion. Had he stayed away altogether, I do not think he would have been very generally missed. In the whole gathering, I doubt if he knew a dozen people by sight; but it was part of the routine of his London day to ride or walk twice in the prescribed locality, and here he paraded constantly.

Lady Julia's quick eye caught him long before he approached. She whispered something to the duchess that made her laugh.

"If Rags cuts me to-day," said this incorrigible young woman to her friend, "I tell you, once for all, up goes the sponge! What is the use of my having been so admired last night, and broken poor old Lord Goneril's heart by my 'get-up' of this morning? What avails my obedience to you, my chaperone; my patience with this — this ill-broken retriever on my other side; my popularity with the wicked in general, if I am to be defeated here on my own ground by Rags? No, duchess; he shall *not* escape. Fire a gun, dear, as we say at Cowes, and bring him to."

Thus adjured, the duchess executed so graceful, marked, and cordial a recognition as could not elude the subject's notice. Rags started, blushed, clutched desperately at his hat, and brought himself up, very awkwardly indeed, but with obvious enthusiasm, in front of the two ladies.

Diffidence, when it springs from sincere reverence and admiration, cannot be very displeasing to women; and I believe shyness in ours, partly perhaps from its rarity, is much prized by the other sex. The duchess was extremely kind in her greeting, and Lady Julia, who ever since the morning poor Fugleman was killed had taken a liking for Rags, became almost affectionate.

"Had Mr. de Rolle been long in town? Why did he never come to see them? They were always at home for luncheon. Would he come to mamma's afternoon to-day—any time between four and seven? Where was he staying? He should have a card directly she got back. Was he still quartered at Middlesworth? How was the dear old county

looking? Had he been over to Tollesdale? Could he tell them any news of the people at Bridlemere?"

Rags winced. Even this flattering interest, real or assumed, was powerless to console him. He answered vaguely and at random, he fidgeted from one foot to the other. When the duchess dropped him some gracious platitude he went down upon his knees with but little eagerness to pick it up. Altogether, though obviously flattered by their kindness, he seemed relieved when the interview was over, and departed awkwardly indeed, but still with much alacrity, on his way.

"What is the matter with him?" said Lady Julia, as his figure disappeared amongst the crowd. "I am sure by that man's manner he is not easy in his mind. How different from yours, Lord Mexico. I suppose if you *had* a mind you'd be as easy in it as possible. Duchess, you've a great deal to answer for; I don't think Rags has ever been the same since you danced with him at our Middlesworth ball. Wasn't that a good ball, Lord Mexico? I forget, though, whether you were there!"

"When my retriever is thoroughly habituated to all such sights and sounds," continued his lordship, ignoring the ball question entirely, "I then accustom him to observe the different modulations of my voice—anger, reproach, menace, expostulation, and encouragement, and his training"—

"Thoroughly destroys his ear for music, I should think," retorted Lady Julia, turning impatiently from his lordship to the duchess, and adding confidentially in her friend's ear, "Do you know, I'm rather unhappy about Rags, that's what we call him, dear, in our part of the country. I've rather a weakness for Rags. He's a very honest, unaffected, good sort of fellow. Rags is unselfish; Rags is straightforward; Rags is sincere; there are not many people you can depend upon like Rags; and— Good gracious! there's Tatters!"

The duchess looked round in unfeigned astonishment, she thought her charge had gone mad; the voice in which Lady Julia spoke the last sentence betrayed deep emotion, while her cheeks and brow became scarlet. At the same moment Nobbler King was passing immediately in front of their chairs, and his little prisoner, hearing its name thus pronounced in familiar tones, struggled hard, with starting eyes and panting tongue, to get free. The young lady half rose from her seat, but controlled herself with an effort, and Nobbler King strode on unnoticed, not, however, till she had thoroughly satisfied herself that his unwilling captive was no other than Jack Brooke's favourite terrier.

Lady Julia, though she might sometimes speak unadvisedly, and in a hurry, was a person who seldom acted on impulse. She felt at this moment, too, that she needed all her self-command ; for although the unexpected appearance of something associated with Jack Brooke had thus agitated her, she was extremely unwilling that her weakness should be guessed, or her discomposure observed by her companions.

Ere the one had time to ask what was the matter, or the other to observe anything unusual, the colour had faded from her face, leaving her only a shade paler than before; and the pretty mouth had shut tight with the expression that always came over it when she made up her mind to a decided stroke. If that was Mr. Brooke's dog she would have it at any price for its master's sake. If it was only an extraordinary likeness to the precious creature, why, she would have it all the same, and for the same reason. There is no proverb of more extensive application than "Love me, love my dog," and its converse.

Nobbler King, in the exercise of his vocation, could see out of the back of his head, like a woman. He knew, as well as she did herself, that the pretty girl under the tree, in the light sprigged muslin trimmed with apple-green ribbons, had taken a fancy to his charge, and though he might not be quite sure of Lady Julia Treadwell, he was perfectly familiar with the name and appearance of the handsome duchess by her side. So he sauntered leisurely off the walk, amongst the horses, and Tatters, peering over his shoulder like a child carried by its nurse, looked helplessly here and there in wistful eagerness to detect the face of a friend.

"Lord Mexico," observed Lady Julia, turning carelessly to that nobleman, who had not even yet quite done with his retriever. "You have talked about dogs till I begin to think there *is* one subject in the world on which you are well-informed and even eloquent. I want a terrier, a rough one, very much: at least, Nethersole does, which is all the same. Don't you think that is just the kind of thing over there? Not up in the trees! Good gracious! but there. The one that curly man in the Ride has got in his arms!"

Lord Mexico's vision having been brought with some difficulty to bear on the animal in question, for he was one of those provoking people who, when warned of an object on the right, invariably look for it on the left, he expressed a qualified approval of its appearance, but showed no further interest in the subject.

"Go and tell the man to come here," added Lady Julia

imperiously. "If it's a well-bred one, I'll buy it, and take it home with me at once. How horrified mamma will be when she sees it at luncheon!"

Lord Mexico hesitated; he looked at his boots, which were thin; he looked at the road, which had been watered into a delightful puddle, fetlock deep, for horses; then he looked at Lady Julia's delicate sarcastic face, and rose to obey. Somehow people always did what Lady Julia told them; and, muttering something about "worsted stockings," he plunged into the morass, and tapped Nobbler King on his unoccupied shoulder.

The strangely assorted pair stopped momentarily the whole stream of the Ride. Peers and peeresses diverged on either side, to the complete derangement of their pace and conversation. A general of cavalry had to make his charger change its leg at half a stride's notice that he might avoid them. An amiable baronet lost both stirrups, his balance, and his hat, almost everything but his temper, from the suddenness with which he pulled up; and an extremely dashing, solitary, *Bois de Boulogne* looking lady, in a velvet habit, relapsed so instantaneously from a *haute-école* canter to a butter and eggs trot, as to transform, with the rapidity of magic, a round, shapely, flowing form of feminine beauty into a mere mass of pudding, quivering and shaking about in a bag.

The Nobbler, however, maintained his position in dignified composure. He took off his hat, and drew up his short form with the air of an old French marquis.

"Glad to see you, my lord viscount!" said he, with perfect assurance, and in a voice that might have been heard at the barracks. "Your lordship looks well, but a little low in condition. London life, my lord, London life! It *must* tell. I find the same thing myself. Your lordship was good enough to oblige me with the loan of half a crown at Epsom Spring. If you happen to have seventeen and sixpence about you, I could pay up at once in gold. It's these small debts, my lord, that give a gentleman a bad name amongst the lower classes."

"Go to the devil!" answered Mexico impatiently, for he observed a whole knot of laughing idlers; amongst others the Duke of Merthyr-Tydvil, with little Caradoc on his shoulder, listening delighted to this harangue. "Go to the devil! you impudent vagabond. Or stay: there's a lady wants to look at your dog. Come into the walk with me."

"Since your lordship is good enough to offer me the choice, I will give you the precedence to which you are entitled over

the other noblemen," replied the Nobbler, with undiminished affability, adding, "I shall have great pleasure in allowing your lordship to present me to any lady of your acquaintance."

This polite speech brought the viscount and the dog-stealer in front of Lady Julia's chair. Tatters recognised her in a moment, making frantic efforts to extricate himself from his keeper's grasp, and the young lady herself doubted no longer that this was the same dog she had taken in her lap to caress that happy morning in the green lane.

She smothered a sigh, this wilful, prosperous coquette, and with it an intense longing to buy the beast at once for a hundred pounds, and take it in her arms, new dress and all, while she covered it with kisses. She began low, however, as she thought, in her bargaining, and remarked quietly, "That is rather a nice dog, though too long-coated for a lady. I will give you a sovereign for him, if I can take him with me immediately, just as he is."

"Very sorry to disappoint your ladyship," replied the Nobbler, with the utmost deference; "but the dog is private property, and is not for sale."

Mr. King, you observe, had far too much tact to attempt with ladies the same grotesque buffoonery that he found answered his purpose admirably with the male scions of aristocracy, who encouraged and rewarded his impertinences. Such want of worldly wisdom would soon have destroyed the easiest and most lucrative branch of his profession, therefore his female customers pronounced him a "most civil and obliging person, who could always supply any kind of dog you wanted at less than a week's notice"; and not one of them but would have flown out indignantly at husband or brother who had hinted the possibility that the darling she mourned so bitterly last autumn and all through the winter, had been abstracted and sold to go to Liverpool through Mr. King's full concurrence and advice, if not actually purloined by that gentleman himself.

"Not for sale!" exclaimed Lady Julia, with rising colour. "Then why do you bring him here? Where did you get him? What's his history? I believe you stole him!"

"I brings him here every day for a hairin', my lady," answered the Nobbler, bowing at every second word with the utmost politeness. "He belongs to a cousin of my own. A respectable tradesman, my lady; a man of some property. He's very much attached to the dog for its affectionate disposition and manners in the 'ouse. I never see a dog so gentle with children, my lady, along of being brought up

with 'em; and broke to a drawing-room—leastways a parliour—wonderful! No, my lady, I don't think as my cousin could be tempted to part of Scamp. Tho' of course he's a man with a large family too. Scamp, my boy, it's times for us to be goin' home."

But Tatters answered in no way to the name of Scamp, and Lady Julia was more convinced than ever that it was the dog she thought. Moreover, though it might be supposed that Mr. King's dinner-hour was approaching, he seemed in no great hurry to depart.

"Five pounds!" exclaimed her ladyship, in a low, rapid voice, a little ashamed of the price, but all her prudential resolutions disappearing before the contingency of losing sight of Tatters.

"It's a bargain, my lady!" replied the Nobbler, closing with so good an offer on the spot, and releasing his captive at once, who jumped without delay into Lady Julia's lap, and whined and trembled with delight, licking her face repeatedly without finding its caresses repelled.

Lord Mexico looked on in astonishment, and the duchess began to think there was something more than a mere case of dog-fancying in this costly and unexpected purchase of an exceedingly rough-coated terrier; but a difficulty now arose which was hardly to be expected in such a quarter: the five pounds was not forthcoming with which to pay for the dog!

Lady Julia did not of course go for a morning's walk with a purse in her pocket. The two or three rings and one bracelet she wore might have been worth seventy or eighty pounds. Her handkerchief and parasol represented two or three sovereigns more; but of ready money she had not so much as a postage stamp, having actually paid for her own chair and the duchess's with two of those convenient little Government securities brought out for the purpose.

Her companion had indeed got her purse with her, but it contained only eighteen-pence, the duke having borrowed all her surplus of silver to pay for his boat on the Serpentine. It was no use asking *him*. Merthyr-Tydvil never had a farthing in his pocket, as how should he, with a generous disposition, a pack of foxhounds, string of race-horses, and three country-house establishments, all on full pay?

Lady Julia turned round and appealed to Mexico. This nobleman's income was two-and-twenty thousand a year, paid quarterly, without deduction or drawbacks. He was virtually one of the richest men in London, had no town-

house, and only a shooting-box in the country; could give five hundred apiece for his horses, or his opera-boxes, or anything he fancied, and laid by every year two-thirds of his income. But when Mexico came to turn his pockets out, he could only muster seven and sixpence in silver, and two of the new halfpence that shine like brass. Mr. King was anxious for his money at once. He had an appointment, he said, with a gentleman in the City at two. He ought to be gone now.

Fortunately, at this crisis, Mexico caught sight of Young Overdue, an ornament to Her Majesty's Household Brigade, with an allowance of two hundred per annum, and the tastes, accompanied by the liabilities, of a *millionaire*.

"Overdue!" holloaed the viscount; "can you lend us a fiver?"

"A hundred of them, if you like," answered the spendthrift, pulling out a roll of notes in a beautiful satin case embroidered with gold. "Take what you want. It's settling day at Tattersall's, so a few more or less makes no difference!"

So Lord Mexico, borrowing a five-pound note from the reckless young soldier, handed it to Lady Julia, who paid it away to Nobbler King in exchange for Tatters, and although she punctually repaid his lordship within twenty-four hours, I think it very probable the viscount forgot to reimburse Overdue, and I am sure the last never troubled his head about it again, one way or the other.

Having obtained what she wanted, Lady Julia grew very impatient to get home.

"You will come to luncheon with us, dear?" said the duchess, who lived only two doors off. No! Lady Julia would *not* come to luncheon. It would make her so late. Mamma never went out the days of her "at homes," therefore she could have the carriage early, and meant to go and see Miss Prince, her old governess, so she took leave of her chaperone on her own doorstep, and hurrying off to the dining-room with her prize, proceeded to give Tatters a most indigestible and injudicious luncheon without further delay.

CHAPTER XXIX

JACK'S ALIVE

THOUGH she travelled without a companion by ordinary mail-train, in a first-class carriage as yet unprovided with any startling apparatus by which to communicate her alarms and misgivings to the guard, Miss Brooke arrived safely in London, without sustaining insult or injury on her journey.

She was only very cold, pale, and uncomfortable while she drove through the morning streets, in the noisiest of cabs, but had presence of mind enough left, notwithstanding her preoccupation, to resist the driver's extortion when he set her down at Miss Prince's door, and to give him not much more than fifty per cent. over his legal fare. She felt strange, confused, wearied and anxious, yet at the same time happier than she had been for weeks, and she certainly did wonder, as she entered the house, whether it was not possible that she should find Philip Stoney in attendance on her brother.

Could she have known that he turned the corner out of the street, about thirty seconds before she drove into it, I imagine she would have felt a good deal relieved and not a little disappointed.

There was no disappointment, however, in her meeting with Jack. He was up, he was out of danger, he was in a fair way for recovery. The strong family constitution, and the hard family head, had carried him through triumphantly, and there was nothing, so Doctor Blair said, to prevent his being on his legs again in a week, as well as ever he was in his life. This good news she learned immediately on her arrival, from Miss Prince, who wept copiously in imparting it. Mrs. George Stoney also, though by no means a weak-minded person, could not resist folding the young lady in

a tearful embrace. Helen felt she was among friends, and, being comforted, consoled, relieved from the anticipation of a great affliction, cried a little, I daresay, too; but she stopped the water-works before she entered the invalid's chamber, and only suffered them to play off quietly and in secret, while she looked out of window, after the first greeting with her brother was over, and she had satisfied herself of his thorough amendment and well-being.

Of course she insisted on becoming head nurse immediately, unpacking her little travelling-bag, and pitching her tent, as it were, at the Front, without delay. Doctor Blair, entering the room, caught her in the act of smoothing her long black hair at the glass over his chimneypiece. The tall, freckled Scotchman started, and turned so red that his whiskers paled by comparison.

Thomas the Rhymer, when he met the Queen of Faëry, guiding her snow-white palfrey through the gleams of the summer lime-trees with more than mortal grace—sweet-voiced, bright-eyed, glowing with beauty, and all ablaze with gold, could not have been more completely taken aback. Jack, lying on the sofa, laughed till his bandages came loose, ere he could explain her presence.

But if Blair was dazzled with the vision that had thus irradiated like a flood of sunshine the gloom of his drawing-room floor, no less was he enchanted with the quiet dexterity displayed by Miss Brooke in repairing damages for the sufferer.

"I have been used to a sick-room all my life," said she, when the doctor expressed his surprise and admiration, "though I never had to nurse Jack before. If you will tell me exactly what you wish done, I think you may leave him to my charge, sir, as confidently as if I was one of your own hospital nurses."

"Hospital nurses!" repeated Blair, who knew the pattern well, lifting up his hands and eyes in vehement protest, "I'm thinkin' we'll none o' us get nursed by the like o' you in *this* world, an' I'm of opeenion, mem, that we'll no' need nurses nor doctors neither in the next. What ye'll do, Miss Brooke, to-day, is just to tak' a bed in beyont, for s' long as it's your pleasure to stop. I'll see and hae the room sorted for ye this vary meenit. Whaur will I sleep mysel'? Oo! I've gotten a lawboratory in the hoose. I can aye rest the better when I ken I'm no' far off my tools. Ye'll gi'e your brither yon bit dose in the phial gin he's wakin' in an hour's time. Gin he's no', ye'll just pit it behind the fire! Fare ye weel, Miss

Brooke; ye're a wise-like young leddy, an' I'm proud to get a grip o' your hand!"

So speaking, Doctor Blair departed to prepare his own sleeping-room for Helen, ere he went out to visit his patients, leaving her fairly installed and settled in a chair at Jack's pillow, for the latter had insisted on being dressed and moved to a sofa in the front room, under the impression that he would be able to leave the house and return home in the course of the day.

But though Jack thought, like other hardy, well-plucked individuals who are unused to illness, that because he was no longer in actual danger, he must, therefore, be quite well, his sister's experience took a less sanguine view of his condition, and she saw that perfect quiet was in this, as in all similar cases, the shortest road to recovery.

So she would tell him nothing of her own doings, and refused even to discuss with him the probability of regaining Tatters, a matter on which Jack's mind was a good deal disturbed; but sitting within reach of him in silence, and busying her slender fingers with a bit of crochet-work, out of the travelling-bag, which only to look at was an opiate and a sedative, she had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes shut, his head droop, and his whole frame relax in a deep, sound, healthy slumber that promised to last for hours.

The apparition of Miss Prince gesticulating in dumb show at the door did in no way disturb the patient, and Helen crossing the room lightly with her noiseless step, gathered from the little woman's pantomime and broken murmurs that it was her own and Mrs. George's opinion Miss Brooke must take some rest. For the furtherance of this object she had made and brought a cup of strong black tea, such as one might give a student who has been out of bed several nights to keep him awake yet another hour, and had placed it in the adjoining apartment for Helen's consumption. Here, too, the young lady found a large easy-chair in which to repose her frame; and here, with the door ajar, that she might watch her patient, Miss Prince left Helen, with an assurance, in a ghostly whisper, that none of the Stoneys, nor indeed any other inmate of the house, should disturb her solitude.

After the strong tea, sleep was of course impossible; and the crochet-work, though she had it on her knee, did not make much progress. Helen soon relapsed as usual into contemplation of the impossibility she resolved every day to think of no more. Jack's accident, and her own undecided step in thus journeying unaccompanied to London, had for a

time broken the thread of her customary reflections; but the anxiety of the one was happily over, and the excitement of the other had passed away with her arrival. The dull, familiar pain began to gnaw, as of old, relieved only by the prospect of seeing Philip Stoney just once more. A contingency that, while it added sharpness to the pangs, rendered them notwithstanding less wearisome and intolerable.

He might be in the house even now, she thought, perhaps only parted from her by the planking of the floor; yet, had it been so, he would surely have afforded her some token of his presence, could not have left her entirely unnoticed, like an utter stranger. Perhaps, after all, he had given her up, as she had him; perhaps he had not really cared for her so very much—he had never exactly *told* her so. Ah! that would be better for him, for both; and yet she could not bring herself to wish it. How wicked of her! No; though she might pray for it, she could not bring herself to wish it!

But it was not so—she was *sure* it was not so! In such matters there is a conviction deeper than all reasoning that accompanies the truth. She knew he loved her, just as certainly as she knew it was her duty to forget him henceforth. If she could see him she would tell him so. The pain would be over then once for all. Why was he away to-day of all days? Where could he be? What was he doing now?

What Mr. Philip Stoney was actually doing at the moment Miss Brooke's reflections brought her to this point, was hurrying back to Short Street, at the utmost pace his somewhat remarkable walking powers could command. He had been obliged to leave home for business before Jack Brooke woke in the morning; but as he had never yet asked for a half-holiday from his employer, he found little difficulty in obtaining a remission of his duties for the rest of the day after dinner-time. Philip was the most considerate fellow in the world of other people's feelings, and he had learned through Blair the anxiety under which the convalescent laboured about his dog. He had employed the first hour of his spare time, accordingly, in seeking the haunts of sundry individuals whom he knew by sight in the streets as belonging to the dog-fancying profession. In such research he had come across no less practised a proficient than Jem Batters, who, after a touching and penitent recognition, not without gushing tears, consequent on an overdose of stimulants, confided to him that he was himself in quest of just such an article as "Mas'r Philip" described. On comparing notes

a little further, Jem "made a clean breast of it," with a few reservations in his own favour, and detailed the whole account of the murderous onslaught to which he had been a witness. Philip was quite satisfied that his friend had been the victim of foul play, though he little suspected at whose hands, and was now more than ever anxious for an interview, in which, if Jack was well enough, they should devise means for the recovery of his favourite, and the punishment of his foe.

Jem Batters, indeed, had declared confidently that he could lay his hand on this or any other missing dog in London within twenty-four hours; and had also expressed his readiness to identify the person of Mr. Brooke's assailant, and swear to him, if necessary, in a court of justice. Previous to taking further measures, however, he wisely suggested that Tatters, with the sagacity of his kind, might have run straight back to the place at which he was kidnapped on escaping from captivity, and proposed, therefore, in the first instance, to accompany Philip as far as Miss Prince's house in Short Street before making search elsewhere. Thus it came to pass that the pair appeared at her door in the very moment when a smart and gaudy-looking gentleman, having rung gently at the bell, was endeavouring to ascertain whether Miss Brooke had arrived from the maid, who knew nothing, as in duty bound.

Multiple, I think I have already shown, was not a man to be easily foiled in an emergency. When he came down to breakfast at Bridlemere, ready dressed for his journey, he was doubtless startled, as well as angry, to learn that Miss Brooke had gone. He recovered himself, however, quickly enough, and dissembled his surprise with habitual cunning, avoiding any interview with the squire, and leading the servants to suppose by his manner that he was aware of the young lady's movements, and had arranged to meet her at some intermediate station, and thence accompany her to her journey's end. He did not of course say so in as many words to the butler who brought in the urn, or the footman who packed up his things, or the coachman who drove him to the station; but each of these domestics nevertheless, as well as the whole household, including Helen's own maid, imbibed somehow this improbable version of the business, and became fully persuaded of its truth.

Multiple's knowledge of Miss Brooke's character satisfied him that she was just as sure to go at once to her brother as a wounded deer is to travel downhill to the stream; but it was necessary that he should make certain of her refuge in the

first instance before taking further measures ; and though he had no desire to confront Jack Brooke, and a stronger objection still to the gaunt Scotch doctor who had questioned him so freely, he thought he might safely inquire at Miss Prince's door whether the young lady was within, and make it appear in this quarter also that even if they had come up in different trains their intention was to travel down again to Bridlemere together.

The moment he set eyes on him, Jem Batters recognised his figure. He caught tight hold of Philip Stoney's arm—

"That's the chap," said he. "I'd swear his life away amongst a score on 'em. I'm not over fond of the Bobbies myself, Mas'r Philip ; but you just ketch a hold on him—I'll have a peeler from round the corner to help us in less than no time!"

Even while he spoke, Multiple turned to depart, having learned what he wished to know. The two men on the pavement cut off his retreat, and Jem advanced on him with more determination than that besotted person usually displayed.

"No, you don't!" said he, coming close up, as if to collar his man. "You're a nice party, you are. D'ye think I wasn't down upon your little game here yesterday? Ay, do, if you dare! If you lift a finger, I'll have every peeler in Bow Street down on ye, you thieving, murdering, dog-stealing blackguard—you!"

Multiple drew himself back, ready to strike if necessary, knowing what a fair blow he could get at an adversary who prepared to collar him and didn't ; but recognising Philip Stoney, whom he had seen in Middlesworth, he thought it best to take the high hand, affecting a tone of haughty surprise rather than indignation at the whole proceeding, as being less an outrage than a mistake.

"What does this mean?" said he loftily. "Who, and what, is this drunken ruffian? May I ask, sir, as he seems to accompany you, whether he is acting under your orders, or on your behalf? Oh! I beg pardon—Mr. Stoney, I believe? You can doubtless assure this impudent fellow that he takes me for somebody else."

The last sentence was spoken in a tone of admirably acted surprise, subsiding gradually into a courteous appeal for that assistance which one gentleman naturally affords another. Philip, however, was not to be thus hoodwinked—

"This is an awkward business, Mr. Multiple," said he. "I am unwilling to make a disturbance in the street, but I cannot

lose sight of you till matters have been cleared up. I am surprised you should have come here!" he added reflectively, and more to himself than the other.

"I came here as an intimate friend of the family," answered Multiple, putting a bold face on the business; "to offer my assistance to the gentleman who is lying ill upstairs, and to inquire after Miss Brooke. Here she comes. If you disbelieve me, let her answer for herself; but in the name of everything that is courteous and gentlemanlike, send this ruffian about his business forthwith!"

Thus adjured, Philip, whose belief in the truth of Jem Batters's story was considerably shaken by Multiple's manner, as well as his own conviction of its extreme improbability, withdrew the latter into the passage, for they had hitherto been standing on the step, and shut-to the door, leaving Jem outside. Helen was already in the hall: she had heard voices in loud altercation, and fearful the noise might wake her brother, had come down to entreat the disputants to be quiet. Philip stood spellbound. Multiple's appeal was no less unexpected than Miss Brooke's appearance at this juncture. Unconsciously, though, he interposed his own person between the young lady and her visitor. The latter was the first to speak.

"Miss Brooke," said he cheerfully, "you can bear witness to my identity. There has been some ridiculous mistake, but your presence sets everything right. Mr. Stoney will be satisfied with your assurance that I come here with the right of one bound to your family by the closest ties—or, at least, very soon about to be so. Is not this the truth?"

Philip looked from him to her, like a man who awaits his sentence. She was quite pale, and even her lips were white. No sound came from them in answer, but one of her listeners, intently watching, could perceive that they syllabled a distinct affirmative.

Then Philip's heart died within him, and he cared little what became of Multiple, or Jem Batters, or Jack Brooke, or indeed anybody in the world. It was true then—all true! How could he have so deceived himself as to disbelieve it when he heard it first?

"I only called to say I was at your orders about returning," added Multiple, quite satisfied with the way in which he had got out of his present difficulty, and chiefly anxious now to secure his retreat. "We will go down together, when you think your brother well enough to leave him, Helen, unless you wish me to return to the squire, and come up for you again in a day or two."

She found her voice now, and a very cold, haughty voice it was, while she replied—

"I shall write to Uncle Archie to take me down at once; and ask him to stay with us till my brother is able to come home."

Then she turned away without further leave-taking, and began to walk slowly and heavily upstairs. Multiple was gone in a twinkling. Philip Stoney stood under the lamp in the hall, and watched the folds of her dress rustling, step after step, towards her chamber. Already she had reached the first landing, and was turning to go on.

"Miss Brooke!" said he, pale, half-choking, but staunch and true to the last. She stopped, and somehow, with one bound, he was at her side. "Miss Brooke," he repeated, "I know it all—I heard it yesterday. I am sure now it is true. My only wish is for your happiness. I pray that you may be the happiest woman in the world! God bless you!"

She gave him her hand, and when he took it a warm tear fell on his own; she sobbed out a return of his solemn blessing, and rushed away to the room she now occupied, at once. Had she stayed another moment she must have fallen in his arms, and told him then and there how well she had loved him—so dearly, so long—and how she loved him still. There was no escape but in flight; nevertheless, when she reached sanctuary, I doubt if she could write legible or intelligibly to Uncle Archie, unless she checked the stifling sobs that rose so wildly, and dried the blinding tears that would not be controlled.

And this was the meeting to which these two young people had respectively looked forward so longingly! that in all their unhappiness they had regarded as a definite point to which they must come sooner or later: and that would surely, in some way or other—they didn't exactly know how—affect their future very beneficially, and enable them to bear their subsequent trials with exceeding fortitude and resignation. Nothing, a week ago, could have distressed either of them so much as an assurance that this interview was never to take place.

And what was its result? A man walking aimlessly about the streets of the busy city, in the vain hope that change of scene and constant motion would take off something, were it ever such a little, from the burden of leaden, hopeless sorrow that he seemed destined to carry to his grave. A woman, sitting bowed over a writing-table, weeping, longing, wild, repentant, heart-broken, wishing only that she might die.

In the meantime, Brother Jack was sleeping a sound un-

broken slumber, that, to use Blair's metaphor, kept the "bung in the barrel" more effectually than all the doctor's stuff the Latin language was ever corrupted to compound. The sleeping draught, directed to be administered in case he should wake, had not indeed been thrown "behind the fire," but stood untouched on the chimneypiece, his fine form lay stretched supine and motionless; the pallor occasioned by loss of blood was on his cheek, but his measured breathing announced the depth of his welcome and unbroken sleep. It was this regular breathing that first aroused Helen from the passion of grief to which she had given way. With every woman worthy of the name, the instincts of the nurse predominate over all other feelings, however engrossing, and Helen was essentially a woman in the most lovable and womanly attributes of her sex. As her ear satisfied her of Jack's salutary slumbers and happy recovery, she blamed herself for suffering any subject in the world to divert her thoughts from her brother's safety, and for dwelling on her own selfish sorrows, however keen they might be, at such a time. She forced herself to allow that she ought to be contented, cheerful, even happy. Had she not saved Walter from dishonour (though she shuddered to think at what a price)? and was not Jack rescued to-day almost out of the jaws of death? Oh! if this blessed sleep would only last, she would have both her brothers to live for; and it mattered little then what became of her!

She composed herself sufficiently ere long to write to Uncle Archie; and it speaks well for her unselfish nature, and habitual consideration for the feelings of others, that she worded her note pleasantly and cheerfully, as if she was the lightest-hearted damsel in the world.

The envelope was hardly addressed ere she was startled by one of those alarming double knocks that seem to shake a small London house to its very foundations, and are inflicted by great people's footmen, as though in indignant protest that such humble tenement should presume to have a door at all. The maid, ascending all begrimed from her work below, answered the summons with unexpected alacrity, but must have been surprised at the unusual proceeding which instantly followed her admission that Miss Prince was at home.

Instead of the orderly entrance customary with the aristocracy in the height of the London season, a beautiful young lady, beautifully dressed, descended from a remarkably well-appointed barouche, with a rough terrier in her arms, to proceed, decorously enough, into the house. No sooner, however, had her feet touched the pavement, than the dog,

struggling violently from her hold, dropped head and tail in a horizontal line, to scour through the open door, and up the opposite staircase as hard as he could lay legs to the ground. The young lady followed almost as rapidly, leaving the stately footman in his six feet of helpless magnificence to exchange with the dingy little maid-of-all-work vacant looks of astonishment and dismay.

They had not the least recovered themselves before the dog reached the top of the stairs, and bouncing with both fore-feet against the door that opposed him, so violently as to burst it open, leapt with a yell of delight to Jack Brooke's neck at a bound, licking his face, hands, hair, whiskers, in an outburst of affection, all the more true and touching that it wanted the power of speech to give it vent.

Jack woke up with a start, to find his favourite in his arms. He thought it was a dream—he was *sure* it was a dream, when he opened his eyes wide, and looked towards the door.

Lady Julia Treadwell could run upstairs as fast as most people, and was not likely to lose her recent purchase for want of a little activity and speed of foot. She darted after Tatters, determined that he should not escape; and the ardour of the chase brought her point-blank into the room where Jack Brooke lay, pale, bandaged, dishevelled, but looking very handsome nevertheless, while he returned the caresses of his dog on the sofa.

Lady Julia, for once in her life, was fairly taken aback. That she had not been thinking of the gentleman on whose solitude she thus intruded during the last ten minutes, I will not venture to affirm; but if so, she had pictured him to herself walking over the farm at home in leather gaiters, perhaps standing at a well-remembered spot in the green lane, looking wistfully towards Tollesdale, and wishing—well, wishing the London season was over, and she herself had begun her country rides again.

It *was* startling, then, to bounce in on him, here of all places in the world, apparently in his bedroom, or the next thing to it, in such *deshabille* too; and, good Heavens! those bandages! What could have happened? Surely not seriously hurt!

For once, I say, she was really taken aback, and this worldly young lady, who prided herself above all things on an external composure and good breeding that no untoward combination could affect, blushed scarlet to the roots of her chestnut hair, and stood stock-still, open-mouthed, looking as awkward

as a milkmaid. Soon, however, all thoughts of self merged in anxiety for his welfare, and she turned quite pale again, though she walked quietly up to his sofa, and placing one hand on his shoulder, while he took the other as reverently as if it had been some saintly relic, prevented the effort he was making to get up and bid her welcome.

Tatters in the meantime jumped down, barked, scoured round the room, and jumped on the sofa once more.

"What is it, Mr. Brooke?" she asked, in a low, eager, broken voice. "Why are you here? What is the matter? Don't be afraid to tell me. Is it anything really serious?"

Jack was in the seventh heaven, like a Moslem who has fallen asleep to clash of scimitar and clang of atabal in battle, to be woke by the wave of his love's green scarf in paradise. He was yet half afraid he must be dreaming still.

"Serious!" he repeated, with a smile. "Not a bit of it! Only a common crack on the head: I've had many a worse out hunting. The doctor—who makes the most of it, of course—says I shall be all right in a day or two. How good of you, though, to come and see me."

"I didn't come to see you, Mr. Brooke," replied her ladyship, and here she coloured up a good deal once more. "Miss Prince, my old governess, lives in this house, and I often pay her a visit." Then, tempering a little the cold water she had just dashed over him, she added tenderly, "I *hope* it is as you say. I trust you may not be dangerously hurt. Oh, Mr. Brooke, I know you are too rash, too foolhardy! Tell me all about it: I must know—I insist on knowing how it happened!"

Jack had not yet coolly reviewed the proceedings of the previous day for himself. As the circumstances rose before him, one by one, he felt how inappropriate they were for narration to such a person, at such a time, and in such a place. He could no more prevaricate than he could tell a direct lie, so he thought it better to refuse her the information she required point-blank. Also, the train of thought thus originated associated itself necessarily with Walter, and something went through him like a knife while he remembered how often he had suspected, and with what apparent reason, that the interest Lady Julia showed in himself was but for Walter's sake after all; so his voice was a good deal colder, and his manner more reserved, while he replied—

"The whole origin of the accident was of a nature that could not possibly interest you or any other lady. Men are

always getting into scrapes, you know, and are lucky when they get out of them with no more damage than a crack on the crown. Mine is really almost well. I hope to be back at Bridlemere to-morrow. We Brookes, you know, Lady Julia, have got very hard heads!"

"And hard hearts too!" thought Lady Julia, though she was careful, you may be sure, not to say so. She only smiled a little scornfully, and observed, with something of impatience, and even irritation, in her tone—

"You haven't thanked me for bringing back your dog! I daresay you never missed him, poor little fellow! I suppose you're like the rest of the world. It's 'out of sight, out of mind' with you too!"

Jack looked up from the sofa, rather reproachfully. There was no mistaking the inflection of her voice, the hardness and constraint of her manner. What had he done now, he thought, to have created this little ebullition of pique, or anger, or dislike, or whatever it might be; and why should she vent it upon him to-day, of all days, when she had him lying helpless, prostrate literally at her feet? A man may be thoroughly ignorant of women and their ways, without being an utter fool; and while Jack looked at his pretty visitor, and marked her shifting colour, her restless gestures, her obvious uneasiness and discomposure, something more than a suspicion of the truth seemed to shoot through his whole being, causing the blood to dance in his veins, with a thrill that was extremely bad for his broken head, and by no means conducive to the regular action of his heart.

"How can I ever thank you enough?" he answered fervently, "whether you brought my dog here, or my dog brought *you*. I always valued Tatters as much as he deserved (there's not such a terrier of his weight in Europe!), but I have prized him still more since—since the last month or two, and I shall like him still better than ever now!"

It was a very lame confession—not the least an explicit avowal; but Lady Julia knew her man, and it gave her courage to continue in the same strain as before.

"If it hadn't been for me, you would never have seen him again. A dreadful dog-stealing man was carrying him about in the Park. I knew him directly; and only think, Mr. Brooke! the darling knew me! So I bought him immediately, and took him home, and gave him some dinner—too much, I'm afraid, for he made himself sick—and brought him here, because I wouldn't let him out of my sight till I could send him safe back to Bridlemere."

No voice—not even the first loved voice of his childhood, he remembered quite distinctly still, had ever sounded so sweet in Jack Brooke's ears ; no face had ever looked so fair to his eyes as that which hovered about him now, framed in a delicate, transparent little bonnet, with its light-green trimming. He could have fallen down and worshipped her. At least he would have liked to tell her he could. But the words wouldn't come. He wasn't brave enough. All he did say was this—

"I hope he did not give you much trouble? Did you get him to follow you pretty well?"

Her voice trembled a good deal now, and her ladyship was rapidly losing her self-command while she answered this very uninteresting question.

"He followed me well enough when I took him home, and seemed to have grown quite fond of me in the carriage, till I brought him to this door. Then he broke away altogether, and rushed up here, and I ran after him, or I should not have intruded, Mr. Brooke, in this unceremonious kind of way. I ought to beg pardon, I suppose, for my rudeness. He's a faithful little dog, poor Tatters. I must say he seems quite happy to have got back to his master. He won't look at me now, and I don't believe he cares for me *either*, one bit."

She was close to the sofa by this time, and its occupant had taken hold of her hand. I am not sure but that he was pressing it to his lips ; and though she looked very happy, the tears were gathering in her eyes. At this juncture Miss Prince opened the door, having heard that her pupil had arrived, wondering, perhaps, whether she could have found her way to the front drawing-room by mistake. The governess, though I am bound to admit she was more shocked than surprised, started violently when she caught sight of the pair, and retired forthwith.

As their subsequent proceedings could have been of interest only to the performers themselves, perhaps we had better follow the example of Miss Prince.

CHAPTER XXX

THE REASON WHY

OLD Dame Batters, suffering more than ever from rheumatism, notwithstanding the fine spring weather, already brightening into summer, had taken to sunning herself at her cottage door of late, creeping about it for hours together, and looking earnestly up and down the green lane, as though in expectation of a guest. For one guest indeed, the guest whose footstep falls unbidden alike at pauper's hovel and at chieftain's hold, she had been long prepared. She was "near her time," she said, "ready and willin'; but she prayed to see her Jem once afore she did depart. Ah! prayed for it, night an' mornin', she did, and so she should! *She* knowed Jem couldn't a got to heaven afore his poor old mother. He'd be strange, too, and dashed like, even if he had! No; she'd see Jem, some odd time, walkin' down the lane with his hands in his pockets, an' arter that she'd goo. She wouldn't want to stop long then—not she!—there!"

And so, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun, just as he had fancied many a time in her absence, Jem saw his mother once more, as he plodded up the green lane from Middlesworth station, having travelled from London, third-class, with money in his pocket furnished by Philip Stoney, and a resolution to lead a sober and honest life for the future, aroused by the arguments, exhortations, and even entreaties of the same individual. Philip's influence had indeed been always beneficial to this poor reckless vagabond, and his kindness, as will presently appear, was destined to be repaid a hundred-fold.

The meeting between mother and son was so quiet and undemonstrative that a looker-on would hardly have believed it a surprise. She patted him on the shoulders indeed, and the tears came thick and fast to her dim old eyes; but her voice was very low and broken, while she sobbed out, almost in the words of Scripture, "My boy! my boy! thee hast been dead, an' art alive agin."

Jem said very little, but he too dashed something from his eyes with his dirty hand; and when she had got him fairly within doors, and at the old chimney corner, with his pipe, he observed huskily—

"I'll nivir leave of ye now, mother—not till you leave of me. I've not bin a good son—far from it. But I tell 'ee, mother, I've seen ye most days, in London an' elsewheres, a-settin' theer in that corner, just as I see ye now!"

Then the poor old woman wept aloud for joy, sobbing and rocking to and fro, as though she were in pain.

It was not long, however, before she composed herself, and proceeded to inaugurate a feast in honour of the occasion. Though it might have been about half-past two p.m., she soon had a little black teapot out of the cupboard, and prepared about a pint of very doubtful tea, without milk or sugar. Over this favourite refreshment, keeping always between him and the door, as though fearful he might give her the slip once more, she related at great length the gossip of the village, and last news round Bridlemere. Put into a less diffuse form, its substance amounted to this: that old Half-cock, the keeper, had had words with the squire about the game, and talked of giving up his place; that Sue Stanion was married, and Cissy Brown wanted to be; that the new curate had given Mother Barefoot a pair of shoes, who had pawned them, and been found drunk under a hedge next day; that Mr. Marks had got the first prize at Middlesworth Show for a yearling bull, and the Tollesdale bailiff only taken the second; that the family were to be home next month, and great rejoicings were to take place, both there and at Bridlemere, on the marriage of our young squire with their young lady; that she (the dame) had herself seen Lady Julia, and thought her not to be compared to their own Miss Helen, and that the latter came to the cottage most days, looking strange, poor dear, and pale—she as used to have such a colour with her walk; and that Master Walter was away for good and all, but they couldn't make out whether he was coming to his brother's wedding or no, and some said as he wanted to get the young lady for hisself; lastly, that the dark gentleman, him as used to come after Miss Brooke, you know, hadn't been seen about Bridlemere since Sir Archibald came down, and she (Dame Batters), who had been young herself, opined that was the reason as the dear took on so, and looked so pale and peakin' with it all!

Whereupon Jem, who seemed to have learned discretion in his ups and downs, smiled quietly, as one who knows better,

but thought well to keep his superior information to himself. He had reasons of his own for connecting Sir Archibald's present sojourn at Bridlemere with Mr. Multiple's disappearance, and did not himself consider the absence of this gentleman a loss to anyone concerned. It was improbable the two would meet again on the same terms as formerly, after a certain interview in London in the private room of a club to which they both belonged, that began indeed with something of a hostile tendency, but concluded in the unconditional surrender of one of the belligerents.

Sir Archibald's first care, when he received Helen's note, was, as usual, to place himself at his niece's disposal, and he arrived at Miss Prince's door just as Lady Julia Treadwell drove away from it in the new character of an affianced damsel. He discovered Jack in a state of extreme discomposure, caused by overwhelming happiness, which the old soldier attributed to lightness of head rather than heart, the result of his contusions. Finding him unusually incoherent, Uncle Archie had recourse to Helen, and was distressed to observe by her countenance that she, too, had been suffering from emotion, though of a different nature. His kindness and sympathy ere long elicited from poor Helen a burst of sorrow, in which the story of her engagement escaped her almost involuntarily, though even to Uncle Archie she would not disclose her knowledge of Walter's dishonour, nor the bargain by which her contract with Mr. Multiple had been ratified.

Neither was he disposed to breathe in mortal ears the suspicions which, notwithstanding De Rolle's generosity, he had conceived, so that the two were for the first time in their lives at cross-purposes, fencing and concealing from each other that which was uppermost in the thoughts of both.

At last Sir Archibald took his niece's hands in his, and said very quietly—

"You do not love this man, Helen, and yet you are determined to marry him?"

"Honour! Uncle Archie," replied pale Helen, trying to smile. "I will not bear to hear him spoken ill of, because I am to be his wife. I have promised, and I mean to keep my word!"

"But, supposing he should give you up?" replied the other —"supposing he should write to you with his own hand, absolving you from your obligations to him, how would it be then?"

Helen blushed; the idea of liberty was indeed more than

sweet, but there was, nevertheless, something of pride and pique in the tones with which she answered—

"If such a humiliation were possible, Uncle Archie, of course a lady does not hold a gentleman to the fulfilment of his bargain."

Sir Archibald contested the point no longer; but after another interview with Pounder and Jem Batters, followed by a long consultation with an old Crimean friend, wrote a note to Mr. Multiple, in which he requested an immediate meeting without witnesses, on business of a private and delicate nature. The old soldier had long since learned that men are never so impracticable as when ranged two and two on each side.

Multiple was ere this pretty well convinced that, to use his own language, "the game was up." Still he had read Helen's character aright, and knew that if he had a chance left it was in her scrupulous sense of honour, and undeviating fidelity to a promise she had once made.

It was his nature to carry an unblushing front, and he met Sir Archibald now with a cheerful manner and a cordial smile, though he was careful not to assume a false position by offering his hand.

"This is an awkward business," said he frankly. "An awkward business, Sir Archibald, and I cannot sufficiently regret the share my partner has had in it. Though at first sight it looks strange, perhaps it is fortunate, after all, that I am about to become connected with the family through your charming niece."

Sir Archibald winced, but preserving his outward composure, observed gravely—

"Mr. Multiple, I have a proposal to make to you."

The other smiled, and offered him a chair, which, however, was declined.

"My proposal to you, sir, is this—that you shall sit down at that table and write out a formal renunciation of any claim you may have extorted on false pretences from Miss Helen Brooke."

It was a large morsel to swallow. Multiple thought his adversary's position must be very strong, or he never would have made so confident an advance.

"And the alternative?" said he, with a laugh that was almost good-humoured in its carelessness.

"A general show-up of the whole affair in a court of justice, which would blow you and your whole business to the devil!" answered Sir Archibald, in the quiet tone of a man who knows he has got yet more in reserve.

"And the publication of Mr. Walter Brooke's peculiar method of doing business," retorted the other maliciously, "which could hardly escape notice from the Horse Guards, and might afford employment to the Committee of this very Club, of which you know he is a member."

"You have communicated with your partner, I presume," said Sir Archibald quietly, and Multiple knew perfectly what he meant.

"Will Mr. de Rolle repeat that statement on oath?" asked the latter.

"Will you choose to see Mr. Pounder in the witness-box?" demanded Sir Archibald in turn. "I don't think it would answer either your purpose or mine," added he, in a grave, stern tone, "to make this matter public. Come, come, sir, there is only one course for you to pursue. Sit down and write me the paper I require. In consideration of its immediate receipt, I pledge myself to refrain from taking any further steps; and although I will trouble you never to speak to me when we meet, I will carry my hostility no further, and I never wish to enter upon this or any other subject with you again."

There was nothing else for it, and Multiple found himself constrained to comply. He could not face a public inquiry, as Sir Archibald well knew, and although the loss of such an advantageous alliance as he had proposed himself was a sad blow and discouragement, anything was better than the complete ruin, both pecuniary and commercial, that revelations, extorted on oath, as to his present affairs, would too surely entail. Neither did he quite fancy provoking the personal hostility of Helen's quiet, resolute, and adventurous partisan. Sir Archibald, well satisfied, received the required paper with a bow, and walked out of the room, saluting his late friend, whom he had forbidden ever to speak to him again, with as much courtesy as if they had settled their difference with less legal weapons than those of moral pressure and moral force.

He had saved Helen, that was his great consolation under the new trial which now awaited him in an interview with Walter.

Himself the soul of honour, it is needless to say that Sir Archibald would rather have lost all he possessed in the world, than that his brother's son should have been guilty of the deed which, in spite of De Rolle's generous mis-statement, he felt Walter had committed. The old soldier shuddered and sickened at the very thought. Nevertheless, the thing was done; there was no undoing it, and the only palliative

left was the promptest reparation, short of public exposure, that could be made to society.

Sir Archibald's better self told him, indeed, that without full confession, there could be no complete atonement for a wrong; but he was an erring human creature after all, and he *could* not, strive as he would, bring himself to forego, on his nephew's behalf, even the shadow of that worldly honour which is to such men as the very breath of their nostrils. He had been accustomed from childhood to identify the name of Brooke with all that was chivalrous, high-souled, generous, *sans peur et sans reproche.* It is not too much to say that he would have given his life rather than this thing should have happened, to blur with a breath of shame the brightness of his fair ancestral shield.

He took Helen down with him to Bridlemere, and the girl, on whose mind a new, vague sense of happiness was stealing, which she felt to be exquisitely delightful and not altogether unreasonable, thought she had never known her uncle so silent and preoccupied. He would not even enter the house, but drove off at once to Middlesworth Barracks, where he was fortunate enough to find Walter alone in his quarters, being indeed the subaltern on duty for the day.

Of their interview it is needless to give the particulars. Each perfectly understood the other, and the full confession that had been staved off by the generosity of Rags was neither offered nor required. It is enough to say that when Sir Archibald returned the salute of the smart light dragoon on sentry at the gate, he was a poorer man by a good many hundreds than when he entered the barracks, and Walter was entirely freed from the debts and liabilities he had incurred, during the last few years, with such industry and perseverance.

One *proviso* was made, however, on which the old officer proved inexorable. Walter must leave the army. He should serve Her Majesty no longer. Sir Archibald would give no reason for this decision; but he had been a soldier for forty years, and entertained his own high and stringent notions of military honour. In any other career, at home or abroad, he promised to assist him to the utmost of his abilities, but his nephew's papers must go in immediately. He would take no denial about that. So every man in the regiment, except Rags, was surprised when Cornet Anastasius Green became Lieutenant, *vice* Walter Geoffrey Brooke, who retired.

Helen and her uncle grew more inseparable than ever at Bridlemere. The squire was better in bodily health, though his mind failed rapidly, and it was with some difficulty that

he could be brought to understand his eldest son s marriage. I imagine the family man of business had a tiresome task in arranging the necessary settlements, which could only be made by his consent. Jack, with his brown locks cut away for a good four inches along his hard, serviceable head, was naturally almost always at Tollesdale. By Lady Julia's express desire they were to be married in the country, and Lady Waywarden had actually consented to forego one half of a London season, in order, to use her own words, "that she might see the last of her child before she lost her for good." Wonderful to say, she took Jack into high favour, and found out that she had always liked him exceedingly.

"So well-principled, my dear," she told her friends, "and in every respect so superior to his brother, the good-looking one."

His lordship, I think, entertained a secret predilection for his old favourite still. He was very staunch in his friendships, and he knew Walter so much the best of the two. Nevertheless, day by day he found something more to admire and respect in his future son-in-law, and it was delightful to have a companion every night after dinner, who could enter *con amore* into his doings at the farm, and knew more about top-dressing than his pompous old bailiff himself.

Viscount Nethersole approved highly of the whole proceeding, inasmuch as the marriage was to bring him home from Eton in the middle of the half. It is to be presumed that he would have welcomed the Great Mogul into the family, with exceeding cordiality, on the same terms.

Lady Julia grew softer and quieter day by day. She even left off talking slang, except on occasions of great excitement, or when she wanted to make Jack laugh. She was very happy, as young ladies sometimes can be, even when they have got all they want in the world. Tatters, also, was more petted and made of than dogs usually are, although they may have successfully performed the office of go-between. He wore a light green ribbon round his neck now, of which I think he entirely disapproved, and besides being dusty, weary and footsore, was generally in a state of quenchless thirst and disgust. You see, Jack had with great propriety presented him as a gift to his ladye love, and the consequence was that Tatters, whenever he missed his master from Tollesdale, was off like a shot, and did the whole distance to Bridlemere, under a scorching sun, at a gallop, returning with the same expedition if he found his search fruitless, so that the poor

little dog was constantly arriving at either place with his tongue out, in the last stage of exhaustion.

Somebody, however, or something must usually go to the wall when a couple are about to be married, and in this, as in many other cases, the canine devotion and fidelity suffered in silence, and abated nothing of its affection or its truth. The sun shone very bright, which added to the discomfort of poor Tatters during the few weeks in which Lady Julia was getting a *trousseau* that, I cannot but agree with Lord Waywarden, seemed of unnecessary splendour and profusion. It was thirsty weather in and about Middlesworth, and beer was consumed in larger quantities than usual. At this critical moment Mr. Marsh, the brewer in Stingo Street, died of a natural complaint called old age, and his business went a begging for a purchaser. It rejoiced the hearts of many an old friend in and about the town to learn that Stoney Brothers had bought it of the executors, and nobody was more pleased with this arrangement than Miss Prince, though she lost her principal lodgers thereby, whom, indeed, she had less occasion to regret, having sold her house in Short Street very advantageously to a patient of Doctor Blair's, and, if I am rightly informed, invested the proceeds of her sale in this very concern.

Where the rest of the money came from, served as a topic of conversation for every gossip in Middlesworth, a large percentage of the population. Surmises, exceedingly far-fetched and extravagant, obtained universal credence. The least improbable was, perhaps, the following. That Mrs. George Stoney had been left a round sum of money by this very Mr. Marsh, who, though her maternal great-uncle, had never taken the slightest notice of her during his life; and that a larger sum, varying with the imaginative powers of the narrator, had been advanced at considerable risk by some personal and devoted friend.

Certain it is that Mr. and Mrs. George Stoney, accompanied by Dot and Jane, and the usual complement of children, returned to Middlesworth and occupied extremely uncomfortable lodgings, with the avowed intention of re-entering their old home when the term for which they had let it should have expired.

Philip also, who had never lost his energies, now recovered much of his former good spirits and bright looks. He was very busy indeed, and scarcely gave himself a moment's respite from his toils. Amongst many other avocations, he was constantly engaged with a series of experiments bearing

on the production of beer, and originating in certain discoveries made by him amongst the ruins of the brewery, as to the effects of fire. Should his chemical theories turn out one-half so successful as he expects, that catastrophe, originating in Jem Batters's drunkenness, will have proved, with one exception, the most fortunate event of his life.

This exception has been owing also to the influence of the thoughtless vagabond whom he has striven so long and patiently to extricate from the Slough of Despond, out of which a drunkard never emerges unassisted.

Had Jem not been an eye-witness to the assault on Jack Brooke, it is probable that Helen's engagement to Mr. Multiple would have been fulfilled. If such had been the case, I think Philip Stoney would never have returned to Middlesworth. I think Helen herself would have looked very different that bright June morning on which I am about to take leave of her at Bridlemere.

It is still sunny, glowing midsummer weather, with a scent of hay, and a quiver of heat, and a hum of insects in the air. The massive trees are black in their deep luxuriance of foliage, and the very birds are hushed and silent in the shade. The deer have buried themselves in distant glades, couching amongst the fern and foxglove in Dingleside at the farther end of the park, and the few cattle visible from the house windows are standing knee-deep in a gleam of water between the woods, tossing their wide-horned heads at lazy intervals, but loath to mar their indolent enjoyment by so much as the movement of a limb. Roses are blooming bright and fragrant in Helen's garden, and not a petal has yet been strewn by the sleeping breeze on its level shaven sward. A brace of white butterflies are flitting to and fro against the blue sky, and a puff of smoke is curling upward in thin, spiral wreaths. Save for these, everything seems basking, quiet and motionless; even the figure from which the smoke is rising reclines at ease in a well-sloped, comfortable garden-chair.

Nine o'clock breakfast is over. The squire has been wheeled off to his library as usual. Jack, released from duty at the farm, in consideration of his approaching nuptials, has departed, on a half-broken three-year-old, for Tollesdale; and Sir Archibald, who is sadly addicted to tobacco, has lit his after-breakfast cigar, and settled himself for a luxurious smoke under the shade of the lime-trees in Helen's garden.

Presently, a white dress comes dazzling out upon the hot gravel-walk beneath the breakfast-room window, and Miss

Brooke, with her black hair shining like jet in the sun, crosses the lawn, humming a tune and gathering a rose as she passes on, workbox in hand, to take a seat by Uncle Archie for an hour of happy, quiet talk, which they both prize as one of the chief enjoyments in the day. The squire sleeps away most of his time now, and Helen's duties are less onerous, if they are more indispensable, than heretofore.

She looks brilliant this fine summer's morning, with her fresh toilet, her raven hair, and her sweet white brow, from which the load of care seems of late completely removed. Sir Archibald's heart stirs within him; it is so like the face of thirty years ago; the face that has never faded in his memory, that pervades even to-day the glowing landscape, the sleeping woods, the earth, the air—above all, the blue, distant heaven, whence he can almost fancy she is looking down upon him still.

Helen makes a little affected grimace of disgust at his cigar, though amongst ladies she professes to "like the smell of them above all things in the open air," as indeed she would of asafœtida if that happened to be Uncle Archie's favourite perfume; but this is a nice little opportunity to tyrannise over him, so she takes it out of his mouth in her taper fingers, and makes as if she would throw it away.

"Jack has given up the vile practice," says she, "even though Julia declares she delights in it. Uncle Archie, why don't *you*?"

"I'm not going to be married, Helen, am I? At least, I hope not," answered her uncle, repossessing himself of his narcotic. "Wait till you've a pipe of your own to put out, my dear. Perhaps it won't be long first, after all."

Helen busies herself in tying up a standard rose-tree, already sufficiently well secured, and the exertion no doubt brings a very bright colour to her delicate cheek. She abandons the tobacco question forthwith, and Sir Archibald smiles slyly, as old gentlemen will when they take unfair advantage of young ladies by the *argumentum ad hominem*.

"Jack is a sad martyr," continues Sir Archibald. "It must be a very laborious business, this making love, Helen. Don't you think so? Almost as bad as making hay this broiling weather. There's Jack, started off directly he'd swallowed his breakfast, under this tropical sun; and if the young horse consents to take him there, which is doubtful, he'll be at Tollesdale all day. He'll have a walk and talk with Lady Julia, luncheon with Lady Julia, and a drive with Lady Julia; tea with the same person; dinner as near her as

In the Garden.

the process of feeding will permit; perhaps another walk and talk by moonlight with Lady Julia to finish up. What *can* they find to talk about? and how tired poor Jack will be when he comes home!"

"Tired!" repeated Helen indignantly. "I don't think Jack and Julia could ever be tired of one another. Besides, Uncle Archie, you know they must have such a quantity of things to settle. How nice it will be when they come to stay with us here for the rest of their lives! I think we're all of us a great deal happier than we deserve!"

While she spoke it was strange how the same expression seemed to pervade those two faces; how like the war-worn old man and the fresh young girl were to each other, for a few moments, ere it passed away. It left his features first, perhaps because the feeling that produced it was even deeper and holier in his heart than hers. Then he smoked for a while in silence ere he asked maliciously—"Will it be too hot for a ride to-day, Helen? Why shouldn't we canter over to Tollesdale in the afternoon and ask Lady Waywarden for some tea? Then we might all come back together; and indeed it would be a charity to poor Nethersole, who has confided to me that his sister's engagement, which he expected would be 'awful jolly,' has turned out 'cruelly slow.' What say you, Helen? I've nothing particular to keep me in this afternoon, have *you*?"

Helen coloured again; nearly as red as the rose she had placed in the bosom of her white dress. It was a blush, though, in which there was more of pleasure than of shame. She looked Uncle Archie steadily in the face, notwithstanding that the crimson was rising to her temples. Then the tears gathered in her eyes, though they shone with a thorough heartfelt happiness, while she replied—"I wouldn't go away this afternoon to be made Queen of England, and you know it, Uncle Archie. It's Philip's day, and he works so hard, poor fellow, and waits so patiently; and he would have had no day at all, and I don't know what would have become of him, nor of me neither, if it hadn't been for *you*, you dear, kind, generous, self-willed, tiresome old monster; and I shall never let you go away from me, though you're very provoking sometimes, but love you and tease you, and take care of you all the days of my life!"

Then she ran back into the house, partly to get the newspaper, and partly to hide her tears, for she was crying from sheer happiness; and Sir Archibald, looking into the depth of the blue summer sky, remembered how just such another

figure had left him years before in an agony of shame and sorrow and remorse, because her woman's weakness could not resist the pressure laid upon it by friends and family. How, when Helen's mother had passed her word to his elder brother, while avowedly she loved himself, he had sworn, even in the bitterness of his sorrow, that he would deal faithfully, loyally by both, sacrificing his own happiness without a murmur; and how through good and evil he had kept the spirit and the letter of his oath.

"And now," said Uncle Archie, flinging the end of his cigar into the rose bushes, with his face still turned to heaven —"now I have my reward. When I meet you there I can tell you how I have watched over those you loved on earth, and kept for you the heart you once prized so dearly, as pure and stainless as your own!"

I know not if she heard him. Perhaps the lowest of our whispers may reach eternity, for it is not so far from any of us, after all.

THE END

PRINTED BY MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, EDINBURGH

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles
This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

Form L9–50*m*-11,'50(2554)444

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

PR
5800
A2
1898a
v.10
Whyte-Melville-
Works
Delayed Paging

PR
5800
A2
1898a
v.10